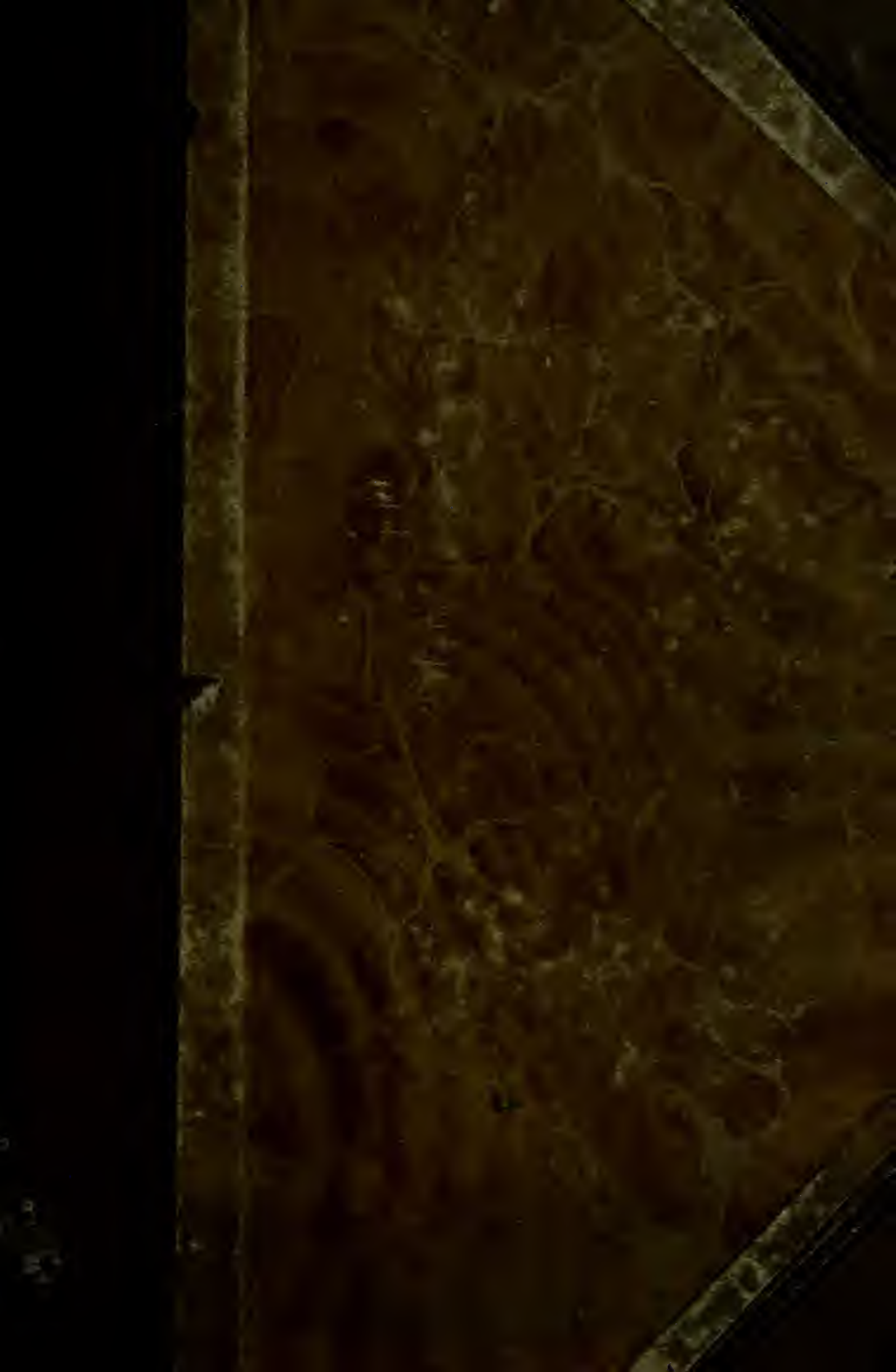

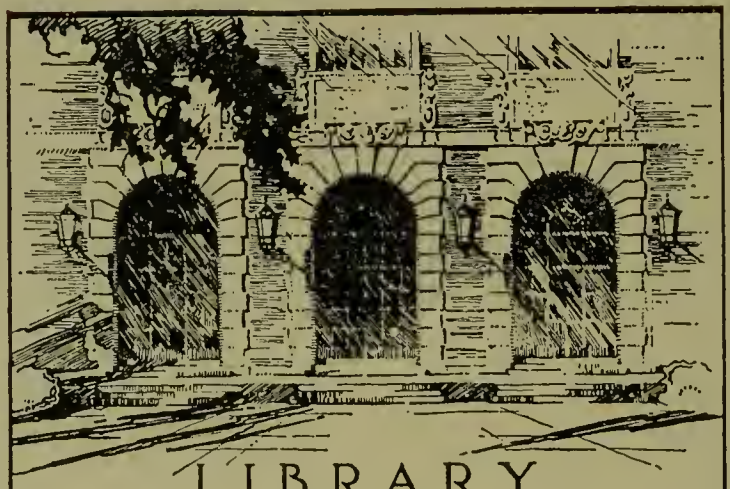

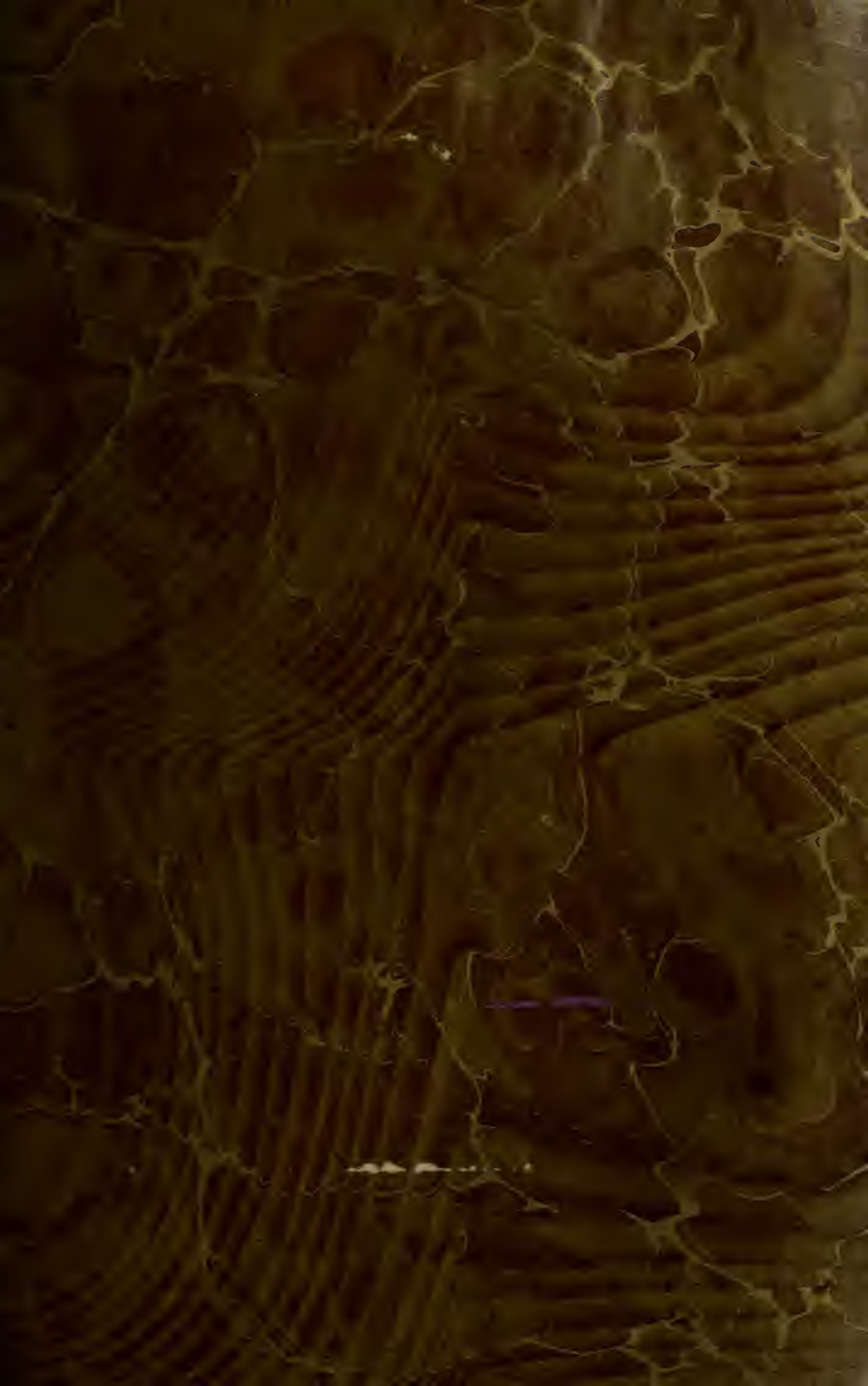

THE PHILADELPHIAN.

VOL. II.

THE PHILADELPHIAN

BY

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'THE MILLIONAIRE,' 'FIELD PATHS,' 'RAMBLES AMONG THE HILLS,'
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CONTENTS

OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

THE PHILADELPHIAN.

CHAPTER I.

MR. FINCH AND HIS FRIENDS.

The door opened, but instead of the man whom both father and daughter had been expecting, there entered Patrick Daly. A solitary candle did not light the room very brilliantly, but it served to reveal to Daly that he was face to face for the first time with Mrs. Martin. He scrutinised her with a minuteness which would soon have provoked resentment in her passionate nature if it had not happened that,

after the first glance, she condescended to take little notice of him. Daly was by no means offended at her somewhat contemptuous treatment of a visitor who at any rate was one of her father's friends. He knew that she did not like seeing strangers, and he took care to say as little to her as he could help.

'I thought I should have met Rafferty here,' he said, as Finch shook hands with him cordially—for Daly had quite won his good-will long ago. 'He came on from Birmingham with me last night.'

Finch looked at him rather suspiciously, inwardly wondering whether the Irishman and Sam Rafferty had been concocting a fiction together to deceive him, and how much Daly knew of the real motive which induced Sam to pay occasional visits to Garlick Hill.

'So he only got here yesterday,' said he,

after a little pause. 'He led me to believe he meant to be in London a week or so ago. We have business together—perhaps he has told you that?'

Finch thought it advisable to put this out at once as a means of feeling his way.

'No,' replied the Irishman, 'he has said nothing to me on that subject. I only know that he is an old friend of yours—and of your daughter's.'

If Daly made this remark by way of endeavouring to elicit a response of any kind from the woman, he was disappointed, for she took no notice of his words.

'Rafferty is getting a little above us,' said Finch; 'we were good enough for him once, but not since his mother made that grand match. I believe he thinks he is coming into a fine property when old Mr. Clavering dies. There will be a good

round sum of ready money for somebody?'

'I hope so,' replied Daly, still speaking more to Mrs. Martin than to her father, 'for I have some little interest in his good luck myself.'

'You? How can that be?' asked Finch's daughter, whose curiosity now, for the first time, seemed to be a little awakened.

'I have advanced him money from time to time, and I suppose there is not much chance of getting it back till his mother is able to do something handsome for him. She has given him a good deal, off and on, but it goes as fast as he gets it. There must be a big hole in his pocket somewhere.'

'This Porthcawl Castle, where his mother lives, is a fine place?' said Finch, who had just exchanged a significant look

with his daughter. 'It must be a fortune in itself! But of course Sam Rafferty will get nothing out of *that*. It is the ready money left to his mother that he expects to divide, I believe?'

'That's about it,' replied Daly, who had now lit a cigar, and was making himself comfortable. He saw that Mrs. Martin's indifference was gradually wearing off, and that she was listening intently to the conversation. 'The Castle and land will go from *us*—I say "us," because we are all by way of being in the same boat together, I take it? But a good share of the cash ought to tumble into our friend Rafferty's hands, unless he offends his mother. Then she would be down upon him, for I tell you she's a Tartar. She rather suspects that something is wrong, and is keeping a very sharp eye upon him.'

'What is it she suspects?' asked Finch.

'Well,' replied Daly, with another side-long glance at the daughter, 'she has a suspicion that he is married; that I know, for Sam told me so himself. If he is, and she finds it out, the fat will be in the fire, and no mistake. I would not give five pounds for all the money he would ever get from *her*. He hasn't been a model son, you understand, but she would forgive him pretty nearly everything but *that*.'

'Then he had better keep it dark,' said Finch, with a slight laugh, such as a man might give who was not particularly interested in the affair.

'That is his only chance; and I should advise parties all round to keep it dark,' added Daly, now feeling much surer of his ground, and hastening to give the warning which was intended to secure his own interests. 'If the mother turns him adrift,

no one will get anything. They say she is rich now—has put by a lot, and has plenty of diamonds besides money.'

'Do you hear that, Emily?'

Finch cast another significant look at his daughter as he spoke.

'Of course I hear it, but I don't see how it concerns us. Is Mrs. Clavering likely to give *me* any of her diamonds? If so, I will go and see her—or perhaps she will come to see us. Garlick Hill has a nice name, and her carriage would look well rolling up to the door of the court. You could introduce me to her, father. What do you think of that, Mr. Daly?'

The Irishman was rather puzzled at the woman's manner, and scarcely knew what to say.

'I don't know much about Mrs. Clavering,' he replied, 'except that she has more of a head upon her shoulders than her son

has on his. He is not half deep enough to keep a secret from her very long.'

'And do you mean to say that he has kept it from you? Has he never told you whether he is married or not?'

Daly could now detect the mocking spirit under the woman's words.

'What actresses all women are,' thought he, 'and the best of them are not on the stage.' And then he said aloud: 'No, he has never told me. If I were in his place, I would take no one into my confidence. He and his wife together ought to hold their tongues till the moment comes when it will be safe to speak. When the old man's dead, and Sam's mother has stumped up, they can talk away as hard as they please. That would be my advice to them.'

'And precious good advice too,' said Finch, taking up one of Daly's proffered

cigars; 'the wife would be a fool if she did not act upon it. I would rather be in young Clavering's position if I had the choice. Sam *may* drop into something good; the other *must*.'

'Do you know him?' asked Daly.

'I can scarcely say I do *now*, though I did at one time when I took pupils, you must understand. This Clavering was then at Oxford; a gay young fellow enough.'

'Never mind him,' interrupted Finch's daughter; 'let us hear something more about Sam Rafferty, the hero of the secret marriage. When he comes here I shall look at him with more interest than ever. Married, and dare not acknowledge his poor wife! That is indeed hard; how does the wife bear it, I wonder?'

Finch seemed to be very restless and uneasy, but the woman evidently enjoyed

the joke. As for Daly, he had already, as he believed, found out all that was necessary. It was quite evident that this faded-looking woman and her reprobate of a father would be perfectly able to dispose of all Sam Rafferty's spare cash between them.

'Come, let us go to the corner and have a drink,' said Finch, whose impatience could no longer be restrained. 'We've had enough of all this talk about husbands for the present. You can have it out with Rafferty when you see him next time. Come, Mr. Daly, I can still offer to treat you to a drink, although I never knew times so hard as they are now. Enterprise is all thrown away. I have written a score of letters the last week, and only got an answer to one—six beggarly stamps enclosed for the poor clergyman with a sick wife and seven children; not a stamp

a-piece. Trade is all going to the dogs. I can't go and call on our aristocratic friends to ask them for a little loan, for my elbow is clean through my last coat, and you can't get a personal interview with nobs when your coat shines more than your boots. Try it some day! Bang goes the door in your face. To get money, you must have money. If I had a thousand pounds I would make a fortune, and so I have told my dear son-in-law, but he would not believe it. He is as hard as steel.'

'I thought you were tired of that old song?' interrupted the woman.

'My daughter,' said Finch, turning to Daly, 'does not like any allusion to her marriage, though why *she* should be ashamed of it I swear I don't know. That's her line always—just as you see her now. All right, Emily, we are going. Just at the corner, Mr. Daly, at the "Three Com-

passes." Good beer, if you like it, and better brandy. Which shall it be?'

'I never take anything,' said Daly, 'and I will say good-evening to you all.'

But Mrs. Martin scarcely condescended to notice his departure, and Finch merely shrugged his shoulders at her silence. Daly shook hands with him at the door, and Finch pursued his way to the 'Three Compasses,' where his face was as well known as the sign over the door.

'Some one has been waiting for you ever so long,' said the pot-boy, as he entered.

The landlord was reading a paper behind the bar, for business was slack at that hour, all the light porters and heavy porters having long ago gone home to Walworth or Hoxton. But Finch was a certain customer, while he had a sixpence in his pocket; and, when he had not, he might

be trusted to a limited extent. He was now depending upon credit for the means of slaking his perpetual thirst, and therefore he showed unusual civility to the gruff landlord. That personage was not in a conversational mood, and he merely made a motion with his hand towards an inner room where the stranger was waiting. Finch knew at once who it was.

'Good-evening, Sam,' said he, a little sourly, as he seated himself by one of the tables on which pipes were laid neatly across. 'Why didn't you come round to the house? And why didn't you come before?'

And, thus saying, Finch rang the bell, and ordered some hot brandy-and-water. Rafferty had evidently taken care to provide for himself.

'One question at a time. I didn't go to the house, because you said in your

letter you wanted to talk on business.'

'Well, and can't *she* be trusted? You don't mean to say you are afraid of Emily?'

'I should be afraid of my own mother in a matter of this sort.'

'Daly has been here,' said Finch, suddenly, and with a sharp look at Rafferty.

He was not surprised to see that his friend and partner looked rather startled.

'The deuce he has! Have you told him anything?'

'Is it likely, my dear boy? He asked a good many questions; particularly wanted to know if you were married, Sam;' and Finch winked at his companion, and tossed off half his tumbler of steaming liquor at a gulp. 'Perhaps he has some plans for you himself—wants you to marry his sister if he has one—who knows? Well, he didn't get much out of us. About busi-

ness, I said not a word. You don't catch a weasel asleep.'

'I wish you and your business were at the bottom of the river,' said Sam, with savage emphasis, and giving the fire a tremendous thrust with the poker.

'Well, well,' said Finch, with well-feigned astonishment. 'Such a flourishing business as it has been, too! You mean to tell me you would dissolve partnership altogether—here and *there* too?'

Finch made a movement of his thumb towards his house.

'That's about it,' said Sam, doggedly. 'Some of these days you will wish we had done it long ago. You'll be in for it pretty steep, my friend, that's one comfort. I shan't go to the wall alone.'

'The wall!—what wall? Who wants to go to any wall? Some evil-disposed

person has scared you, Sam. Haven't I told you we are all safe enough ?'

Here Finch drew his chair close to Rafferty, and said a few words to him in a very low voice.

'Not if I know it,' broke out Sam, firmly; 'I have had enough of that. I never have an easy moment when I think——'

'Well, don't think,' interposed Finch, soothingly; 'leave all the thinking to me. I am not afraid to face the consequences. Leave it to me, I tell you. We must raise the wind, and it can only be done in one way—unless your old woman will shell out.'

'She will not give me a shilling till the next allowance is due.'

'Very well, then—that proves what I say. There is only one thing for us. Have another go of gin first, and we'll

talk it over.' The boy brought the gin, and Finch, still sitting close to Rafferty, proceeded with his argument. 'We must hang together, at all costs——'

'Why, what do you mean?' said Sam, in alarm.

Finch laughed outright.

'What a chicken-hearted customer you are,' he cried. 'I only meant we must stick together. There is no hanging job on hand, at least not yet. Take everything as it comes. What we have done as yet is a mere flea-bite. Look at the facts, Sambo'—Finch resumed his playful manner, and patted Rafferty's knees in a fatherly way—'I say, look at the facts. This young Clavering is standing in your path, you get hold of some of his letters, and one day I am lucky enough to find —no matter where—a few blank cheques of his banker's. Then I imitate his signa-

ture, and devilish well too, and you pass the cheques, for you look like a gentleman, and I don't, and we are put in funds. How much do we get? Scarcely a hundred—so little that he has never noticed the amount in his pass-book, if he ever looks at it, which I doubt. I tell you, we are as safe as a church. So long as we don't make too big a haul at one time, we cannot be found out. Fifty now and again, to a careless fellow like that—what is it? He don't know it, and there is no reason why he ever should. I sign the cheque, and you put it out, for you know where to do the trick better than I do. Only try it on with small amounts, and you might keep on doing it for ever. A cheque payable to "self" or "bearer"—and you are the bearer. Nobody has asked you any questions yet, and once you went into the bank itself, and brought out the shiners in

your hand. There's no safer occupation going—nor a more gentlemanly one. That's my candid opinion, and I've seen something of life.'

'Well, then, carry on the business yourself, since you like it so much. I can do without the money.'

'No, you can't, Sam; there you are mistaken. *I* want money, and so do you. That follows as a matter of course. When I am short, you are short—and t'other way. We work in and in, and, while you act upon the square, so do I. When you do not, it may be ugly for us both!'

Finch's look at this moment spoke more forcibly than his words, and it had its effect upon Rafferty, who began to give way before the stronger will.

'What do you want me to do?' he said, in a nervous tone.

'Come, now—that's more reasonable.

That you and I should have any disagreement is incredible. I always tell Emily that you are the only real friend we have; and, by-the-by, I know she would take it kindly if you would go round. I don't like to tell her you have been so near, and yet wouldn't go in—if only to pass the time of day. It makes things look so much more cheerful for us all. What do you say—can you manage it?'

'Let us hear what you want me to do first.'

'So you shall, after you have treated me to another go of brandy—it will be *my* turn next time; I shall be in funds before we meet again. Well, now—what is to be done, you ask? Just the same as before, my dear Sambo. Here is a cheque drawn by Geoffrey Clavering for a very small amount—twenty pounds; it can't affect his balance, and he will never dream that

anything has gone wrong. Such a trifle as this,' continued Finch, commiserating himself, 'mocks our necessities, but if we can't get any more—and I don't think we can—we will take that. Get all you can from everybody, and be satisfied—such has been my invariable rule in life, Sam. Make it yours.'

Finch looked as if he had just made his young friend an extremely valuable present, and he then proceeded to draw an old leather pocket-book from the inside of his coat, gave a cautious glance round the room, and took out a piece of paper carefully folded. This he handed over to Rafferty.

'There you have it,' said he, 'as neat and clean as a new pin. Not a stain upon it, and not a word to be said against the writing. I wish you could do it as well, Sam—it would be a sure de-

pendence for you in a virtuous old age.'

'Where did you get this cheque from?' asked Sam, turning the document over and over in his hand. 'It seems all right.'

'*Seems*, Samuel? Nay, it *is*. It is precisely the cheque you would get at the bank itself.'

'But the bank didn't give it to you, I suppose?'

'How do you know that? Anyway, there it is, the genuine article. It comes from an undeniable book, sold at the bank. If you are asking for information to serve you in the future, Sam, I don't mind entering into particulars. Take a cheque out of a book, counterpart and all, and how is the owner to discover that it is gone, unless he closely examines the numbers? Not one man in a hundred thousand takes the trouble to do that when he fills in a cheque. Think of this whenever you find

yourself left alone with a cheque-book. Help yourself to one, and thus gradually lay up a provision for the future!'

'You're a nice man!' said Sam, whose principles were not yet quite so elastic as Mr. Finch's, and who had some sense of shame left in him.

'Such has been the general verdict of both sexes upon me,' replied Finch, gaily. 'I believe in the main it has been deserved. But once more to our affairs. The first thing to-morrow morning, my good Samuel, take the proceeds of honest toil now in your hands to the bank, and we will divide the cash. I only ask you for half, and yet all the really difficult part of the work has fallen upon me.'

'Why don't you go and pass the cheque, if you think that's so very easy?'

'Because of my poverty, my blooming Sambo! Look at my boots, at my hat, at

my coat. It is a free exhibition. The porter at the door would spot me at once. Do I look like a responsible "self" or "bearer"? I am down at heel, I smell of tobacco, my nose is red—indigestion is the sole cause, but how is the cashier to know that? People with red noses *do* cash cheques, but there is not the same *tout ensemble*. I know my weak points, Samuel —and yours too, you donkey!'

But these last words he did not utter aloud.

'I suppose it must be so this time,' said the tool, reluctantly. 'But remember, I will do it no more! Threats or no threats, I have done with this business after to-night.'

'After to-morrow, you mean, Sam,' said Finch, as they went out of the house. 'Well, I hope we shall soon drop into something better, both of us. That old Welsh

squire *must* go before long—I wonder you have not managed differently in that quarter;' and Finch gave his friend a significant nudge.

'What do you mean?'

'An old man to stand between you and a handsome competence all this while! Bah! There is no *go* in you younger men.' Here they reached the court where Finch lived, and Sam stopped short a moment. 'That's right!' said Finch. 'You are coming up to make your pleasing bow? No? Can't you look in even for ten minutes? It is always a treat to look upon your cheerful countenance, Sam.'

'Another time,' replied the younger man, uneasily. 'I never feel safe when I have one of these cursed cheques in my pocket. It is the last I shall ever have—so, good-night.'

'Good-night, dear boy,' said Finch,

affectionately, 'and may you never have to work harder for ten pounds than you have to do for this.' He groped about in the dark for the doorway of his house, and stumbled upstairs to bed. 'Now for that American gent, Colonel Pendleton,' he muttered, as he put out the light. 'I think he will turn up a prize, especially if I can keep him to myself a little while. Reserve yourself for me, my colonel, a week or two, and you shall find your name recorded on my list of conquests.'

CHAPTER II.

A CARD IN RESERVE.

What Mr. Finch meant by his resolution to tackle the 'American gent' was partly set forth in a letter which Colonel Pendleton received at this particular time, and which, though somewhat enigmatical to the colonel, was regarded by Finch himself as brief and to the point. Thus it ran :

'Sir,

'You are a friend of the Claverings, and just now they need friends, as you may have suspected. Father and son are

hopelessly separated, at a time when there is urgent need for them to be united. I think it would be worth your while to have an interview with me. I know your interest in the Clavering family, and believe that I could serve both you and them. Do not misunderstand me. I shall not ask any money for doing what I can to prevent mischief. I will meet you at any time, but, if convenient to you, perhaps you will see me at my own house, 3, Church Court, Garlick Hill, City. I will wait every evening till eight o'clock.

'Your obedient servant,

'THOMAS FINCH.'

The colonel read this over several times, and although he was at first disposed to throw it aside without further ceremony, yet there was a hint or two in it which chimed in strangely with certain thoughts

that of late had passed through his own mind. It so happened that at this very time he was about to take his daughter to London, where, as a matter of course, they were to meet Geoffrey Clavering. He decided that on the first favourable opportunity he would go and see this Mr. Finch. Accordingly he found his way, not without difficulty, to Garlick Hill, and was directed by a dirty-faced woman, who stood at the entrance of the court, to the abode of his correspondent.

But Finch had not bargained for his coming till after dark, his own special time for paying visits, and the result was that he did not happen to be at home when the colonel rapped with his stick on the door. The daughter, however, was there, and evidently she was there with a purpose — that is to say, she expected the colonel, and had even made some preparations to

receive him. The room was unusually clean and tidy: a white blind had been put across the window; moreover, Mrs. Martin had taken some pains with her own toilette, and the visitor was rather struck with her appearance and manner. There was something about the woman that was superior to her miserable surroundings; traces of refinement were visible in her bearing and appearance, and these the colonel instantly recognised. They made him wonder how she got there, and in what way her lot was associated with Thomas Finch.

'You have come to see my father,' said Mrs. Martin, clearing away one half of the mystery at a stroke. 'He told me you might call at any time. But he did not tell me why he had sent for you.' She gazed at him, as the colonel thought, long and curiously, as if she were trying to remember where she had seen him before.

'He did not tell you?' repeated the colonel. 'Then let me assure you that I know as little of your father's motives as you do. He did, it is true, make some allusion to my friends, the Claverings.'

For an instant or two, the woman seemed thoughtful and absent, and then she asked a question.

'Would you mind telling me what my father has said to you?'

'Perhaps you are aware that I do not know him. But I received a letter from him which seemed to be suggestive of some trouble—some—I know not what—it may even be some *danger* to my friends. It is that which brings me here. Would you like to see the letter? Here it is.'

The woman took it from him, and ran her eyes hurriedly over it. A contemptuous smile came to her lips as she read.

'I thought as much,' said she, as she folded up the paper and handed it back. 'I only wonder that you have not had an invitation of this sort long ago. My father does not lose his opportunities. He must have heard your name from my——' here she checked herself, and after a big pause she continued, 'from Mr. Rafferty.'

'Mrs. Clavering's son?'

'Yes; my father and he are friends. We have known him some years. But I have not seen him lately; once he was a regular visitor.' A dark look was upon her brow as she added, 'Everybody deserts us sooner or later.'

'But why does your father take any interest in the Claverings?' asked the colonel.

The woman laughed.

'You will find out all about that by-and-by. But, if you take my advice, you

will be careful how you have any dealings with *him*—this I tell you, although he is my father.' Then her look softened, and she addressed him in a different tone. 'I have heard a great deal about you, Colonel Pendleton. I wish I had seen you long ago. I have heard, too, of your daughter—she lives at Porthcawl Castle, does she not?'

'It has been her home for some years,' said the colonel, a little surprised.

'And she is very beautiful, I have been told?'

Her tone was earnest, almost eager; the colonel was more and more puzzled. Why did this woman feel even a passing curiosity in him or his daughter?

'I am scarcely a fair judge of that,' he answered, with a slight smile; 'her friends at Porthcawl are much attached to her, as they have cause to be, seeing that she is so devoted to them.'

'You mean Squire Clavering and his son?'

'Yes—but, pardon me, you seem to be well acquainted with the family?'

'From hearing so much about them,' replied the woman, after a slight delay. 'Sam—Mr. Rafferty—is never tired of talking about them when he comes here. At times I like to hear his stories of the family—especially of the old squire, and his grand castle, and the sea, and the wild rocks; it is a change from Garlick Hill! It may seem strange to you, but I often wish that I could go and see this castle myself. Perhaps I shall, some day!' Her lips were compressed, there was a look of determination in her face which the colonel had not noticed before. 'The squire's son,' she went on presently, 'is seldom there now, I believe?'

'Very seldom. Unfortunately he is not

on good terms with his father. Your informant has doubtless told you all that?'

'I have heard a good deal about it. But young Clavering *does* go to the Castle sometimes, and of course he knows your daughter?'

'They have been intimate from childhood.'

'And I daresay he sees her oftener than he sees his father?'

'Naturally—when he is in London with me they are a good deal together. I left him with her to-day. We should be almost strangers here but for him.'

Mrs. Martin listened attentively to every word, and her eyes never wandered from the visitor's face. As for the colonel himself, he found that he was talking freely with this strange, lonely woman—he hardly knew why.

'They are good friends,' said Mrs. Mar-

tin, half to herself. 'Rafferty has often told me *that*; he tells us everything, but I do not believe all he says. I suppose this part of his tale is true. We have heard so much of your daughter and the squire's son that we almost seem to know them. You will not think me rude,'—and here she appealed to the colonel with a look which lent a certain sweetness to her features, and was not without its effect upon her visitor, quickly sensitive as he was to every expression of a woman's face. 'Believe me, I do not ask these questions from impertinent curiosity. It is in order to prevent harm that I speak, not to do it.'

'I will answer you,' said the colonel, with a grave smile, 'although I confess all this is very mysterious to me—including my visit here.'

'It will be clear to you before very long.

What I wanted to ask was this: are not your daughter and young Mr. Clavering something more than friends? We were told that they were engaged, and I rather think it is partly on that account you have received a letter from my father. Is it as we have heard?'

'Your friend, Mr. Rafferty, is evidently not always to be trusted. My daughter and Mr. Clavering are friends, as I have told you—nothing more.'

'Are you sure?' asked the woman, with curious persistence.

'As sure as we can be of anything in this uncertain world,' replied the colonel, smiling at the earnestness of his new acquaintance.

The woman was again silent. She seemed almost to have forgotten the existence of Colonel Pendleton, when a sound outside suddenly aroused her. It was the

heavy step of her father on the creaking stairs.

'Here he comes,' she said, starting up hurriedly. 'One word of warning in exchange for what you have told me! Whatever he says to you, do not give him money —above all, do not write to him. What he means by danger to your friends, I do not know; but, if danger there had been, I should have heard of it. Distrust what he tells you! Before I saw you, I made up my mind that you should not be another of his victims—I am doubly resolved now!'

She held out her hand, and the colonel took it with a low bow. He heard the door behind him open, and saw one look exchanged between the woman and her father —and then Mrs. Martin passed quickly from the room.

'You have done me much honour,

colonel,' said Finch, rather more disturbed than was his wont, for he shrewdly suspected that something had just passed not conducive to the success of his plans. 'I am sorry I was not here to receive you. My daughter has doubtless explained matters,'—he watched the colonel keenly as he spoke, but his face was impenetrable —'at least so far as she could, for I have not told her very much.'

'She has explained enough,' said the colonel, with a coldness in his manner which had not once been visible in his conversation with the woman.

'She is a good creature,' continued Finch, with a partial recovery of his free and easy manner, 'but eccentric. She inherits that tendency from her mother, who was very eccentric—especially towards the last. It is a great pity that Emily does not take after me, for I am a practical man,

colonel, always going straight to the point.'

'Then let us come to it at once,' said the colonel, shortly. 'Why have you written this letter to me?'

'That, of course, I am anxious to tell you, but it cannot be told in five minutes. In the meantime,' and Finch drew down his shirt cuffs, which were scrupulously clean for this occasion, and seated himself by the table opposite the stranger, 'perhaps you will tell me if I happen to be an entire stranger to you?'

'Certainly you are.'

Finch drew a long breath of relief, and was once more quite himself.

'So much the better,' said he; and then, fancying that the colonel gave a nod of acquiescence, he as quickly added,—'I mean in one sense. For Rafferty and I are not always good friends, and he is one

of those men who, when they fall out with you, do not care what they say. You may have observed that?'

'I do not know Mr. Rafferty.'

'No? Why he talks as if he were your intimate friend. Ha! ha!' Mr. Finch seemed to be immensely tickled. 'Fancy his taking *me* in again, after all my experience! I ought to have known him better. Sam has a lively imagination, and sometimes he exercises it at my expense. His mother, now—I suppose she is as rich as he says?'

'You forget that I have not come here to answer your questions,' said the colonel, taking up his hat.

'Very true—forgive me; yet it is really a part of the main business, as you will say when you know all. You are aware that Rafferty pays a visit to his mother occasionally at Porthcawl?'

'I have heard so,' said the colonel, beginning to see that he might as well hear this man out.

'And once or twice lately a great friend of his has gone down with him—for no good, you may depend upon it. That some mischief is afoot I am tolerably sure, and I daresay I could get the proofs if you wished to have them. If Squire Clavering knew that such people as I refer to had been near his house, he would not be over-pleased. Now what I have to say is this, colonel—you ought to put young Clavering on his guard against Rafferty; he is a man who will stick at nothing to get money. That is one reason why I wished to see you. Another reason—but first of all do me the favour to read this.'

He held out a paper which, at first, the colonel was disinclined to take, but his

eye fell upon the handwriting, and he altered his mind. The note was from Geoffrey Clavering to Finch, and a certain degree of familiarity between the two might have been inferred from it. Finch watched the countenance of his visitor closely while he read the document. When the colonel returned it, Finch folded it up carefully and replaced it in his drawer.

'That will show you,' he said, with a confident air, 'in what light the younger Mr. Clavering regarded me. I will not deceive you—that letter was written some time ago. Somebody or other has poisoned his mind against me since then. I have enemies, and they have got at him. If you see him, do not mention my name just now—it will be best for all parties. After a little time you will do as you please. It is with a view to save *him* as well as his father that I have sought for this interview.'

'Then Geoffrey Clavering is in some danger,' said the colonel, with a touch of sarcasm which did not escape Finch's notice, although he judiciously pretended to be unconscious of it.

'Decidedly,' said he, loftily; 'in danger of being made the dupe of a swindler—that among other things.'

Finch got up, opened the door, listened carefully, and resumed his seat. Colonel Pendleton followed his movements with a half-amused look.

'You expect visitors, then?' said he, quietly.

'Not at all,' said Finch, a little uneasily, 'but my daughter is suspicious, and she has been rather excited about your visit.'

'Perhaps your enemies have poisoned her mind also?'

Finch shot a quick glance at his visitor.

'Evidently,' thought he, 'the worthy

colonel does not know much at present.' Then he said aloud: 'She has had her troubles, poor thing. An unhappy marriage, you understand—quarrels, at last a separation. You have heard *that* story before, at any rate.'

'Well, yes, I have,' the colonel was forced to admit.

'Never mind my daughter—let us get back to young Clavering. I believe that he is the victim of a set of sharpers who have long been fleecing him; and, besides that, there may be other difficulties and troubles that his friends know nothing of. It is not very wise to turn a young man loose upon the world without a friend. Suppose he has got into some entanglement which his father never heard of?'

Finch spoke in a somewhat significant tone, and his visitor was made a little uneasy.

'What do you mean? I hope you have not sent for me merely to listen to riddles?'

'I cannot help myself,' said Finch, stretching out his hands like an orator. 'At present I am obliged to deal in riddles. I cannot speak plainly without doing more harm than good, but I have said enough to let you know that trouble is in the air. If you could speak to young Clavering and get his confidence, you might save him.'

'Save him from what? Really, you must be a little more explicit if you want me to believe that you are acting in good faith.'

'Of course I want you to believe that—it is essential for the interests of your friends. I repeat, you could probably save Clavering, if you had his entire confidence, from taking a step that might be fatal to him. One false step is generally enough

in a lifetime! Look at Sam Rafferty!—they say he is married to some woman whom he dare not even mention to his mother. The result is that he lives on the brink of a precipice.'

'You are wasting my time. What are Rafferty and his affairs to me?'

'They may be a great deal some day. As for young Clavering, if he is to be kept out of harm's way, he ought to be under his father's roof. I do not myself know all the facts, but I could get at them by means of Rafferty. The worst of it is, it would cost money, and that is an article which we seldom have too much of in these parts. If you thought proper——'

'I do not think proper,' interrupted the colonel, in a tone which Finch did not at all like.

The conversation, somehow or other, would not take the direction he wished,

and he felt confident that his daughter had spoilt his day's work for him.

'You would not hear me out,' he said, in a tone of gentle remonstrance. 'I do not want money for myself, but to serve others. When I had money of my own—as was the case at one time—I did not use it for the gratification of selfish purposes. I have all my life sacrificed myself for my friends. Now I desire to serve Mr. Clavering. Will you induce him to go back to his proper home, and be on his guard against the visits of Rafferty to Porthcawl?'

'This Rafferty, then, is a very terrible person?'

'You are inclined to laugh at all this, colonel; but, trust me, if you take it in that light you will be sorry for it. If I could tell you more, it would be better, I admit—but I dare not.'

'What are you afraid of?'

'Of everything—of *her*;' and Finch pointed to the door through which his daughter had passed. 'She is troublesome to manage—always has been since she was a child. As for Rafferty, he is my friend——'

'So I should have inferred,' said the colonel, drily.

'But there are reasons why I cannot hold to him in what I believe he is doing now. Give me a day or two more, and perhaps I shall be able to make everything clear to you. Think what you will of me, but I have my own reasons for wishing to avert harm from the Clavering family.'

'And this is really all that you have to say to me?' said the colonel, with his hand upon the door.

'It is all at present.'

'I think you might as well have spared

your breath, and me the trouble of this visit.'

'You will think differently some day.'

The two men looked hard at each other. The colonel turned away with a contempt which he took no pains to conceal, and Finch followed his visitor obsequiously down the stairs. When he returned, his daughter was waiting for him, but, in spite of his hardihood, he shrank from the contemptuous scrutiny of her flashing eyes.

'Well,' she said, with a laugh which never failed to irritate him, 'have you made a good beginning? Does he seem likely to be worth plucking?'

Finch turned away angrily, and lit a short black pipe.

'Go to bed,' he said, 'and think of your own affairs. It will take a good deal of thinking to set them straight.'

'He did not respond in a proper spirit,

I see. Perhaps some one may have given him a hint?'

'You are capable of doing it,' replied Finch, with a look of anger and suspicion. 'If I were certain that you had——'

'Well, what then?'

The woman looked at him coolly, and Finch saw that, whatever might have been the case formerly, his threats no longer had any terror for her.

'It would be the worse for you,' he growled, 'that's all! This man might have helped us but for your cursed interference. Everything else is about played out, and I had a card in reserve for this American colonel. It is through you that I have lost with it!'

'I think you had better let him alone.'

'Oh, he is to be under your protection, too, eh?' sneered Finch.

'Yes—for the present, at any rate,' replied the daughter, unmoved.

'And will you tell me where we are to get money from?'

'What! Has your skill in penmanship entirely failed you, then?'

A gleam of triumph passed over Finch's face as he snatched up his hat to leave the room.

'I have not quite lost it yet, as some of your dear friends shall have reason to know,' said he. And, leaving that hint for his daughter to think over, he hastened to the enjoyments of the public-house.

CHAPTER III.

THE POISON WORKS.

When Colonel Pendleton set out on his expedition to Garlick Hill, he left his daughter, as he had often done before, under the charge of Geoffrey Clavering. They were always glad to be together, and it had never yet occurred to the colonel that it was his duty to throw any restraint over their intimacy. It is true that Rufus Snapper had more than once hazarded a suggestion with that end in view, but he seemed to hesitate to follow it up when pressed. One might have thought that he

liked, and yet disliked, to see young Clavering and Edith Pendleton much together. The colonel could not tell what his friend's mind really was, and Snapper himself was often in some doubt about it. Meanwhile, the former companionship of the young couple went on much the same as ever.

It was not without surprise that Clavering heard of the colonel's singular visit to the city.

'He received a letter in a strange handwriting one morning,' his daughter explained, 'and, after he had read it, he seemed very thoughtful, and, I fancied, a little anxious. Then he told me he must go and see the writer. But who the writer is, I do not know.'

'Perhaps it is a portion of a terrible conspiracy,' replied Clavering, with an indifference which might have been partly affected.

'I don't know; but the conspirators live in a very out-of-the-way place, I believe —Garlick Hill. Did you ever hear of it?'

'I have heard of it, as one hears of any other place.'

'And you do not know where it is?'

'I have but the faintest idea, and even that may be quite wrong.'

'Well, it seems a strange place to go to on business of importance, and in reply to a letter from a stranger. I have been rather uneasy about it.'

'Depend upon it, your father had a good reason for what he has done,' said Clavering, whose face had become very grave during this brief conversation. 'There is no necessity for uneasiness. Wherever the colonel goes, he is well able to take care of himself.'

'And so *you* do not know who his correspondent may be?'

'How can I, when I have not even heard his name?'

'You look very serious, Geoffrey,' said the young girl, reading his countenance attentively. 'You do not really believe there is any danger?'

'What—to your father? Not the least in the world. Depend upon it, he will come back and answer for himself very soon.'

'Not for another hour at least, and you have promised to stay here till he returns. That is very hard; I think I will release you sooner—say in half-an-hour.'

She spoke half coquettishly; for in truth her visitor had seemed more *distrait* than might have been deemed altogether complimentary to her.

Clavering appeared to shake off the burden of some heavy thought, and a cheerful smile once more came upon his lips.

'The gloom of Porthcawl Castle has not subdued you yet, Edith,' said he. 'Nothing pleases you like trying to persuade me that I care nothing about you.'

'Because it is true,' replied the young girl, with mischief in her eyes.

'Sometimes I almost wish it *were* true.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Edith, with a great stress upon the word.

'Yes—for then I should not be quite so wretched in your absence. You will laugh at me, as usual, for telling you the truth; but when I am away from you there is a great blank in my life.'

'Indeed, I do not laugh at anything you say, Geoffrey.'

'Then you believe what I have just told you?'

'If you look so much in earnest, I suppose I must,' replied the young girl, still with the same mischievous air.

But Clavering seemed to know how to interpret her ways better than a stranger might have done, and he was now quite satisfied.

'I have been looking forward to this visit of yours for weeks past,' he said, drawing his chair nearer to her, 'and yet I verily believe you begrudge me this short hour. Already I have received one hint to go away.'

'Then evidently it was lost upon you.'

'Because I hope for better fortune. Come now, Edith, have a little mercy—recollect what I have had to go through, and think what weary work it is to be waiting and longing to see you! Is it three months, or three years, since we met?'

'It might have been three years if it had depended on you, Geoffrey. Why have you never been to see us since that day

when Mrs. Clavering nearly ran over you? Are you afraid of her?'

'Upon my word, I am inclined to think you have hit it,' replied Clavering, with a laugh. 'A spiteful woman is somewhat to be feared, if she is clever—and my good stepmother is a little too clever, if anything. She is an enemy not to be despised.'

'No, indeed,' said Edith, with an involuntary sigh.

'Clever, unscrupulous, deceitful—to deal with such a woman requires more experience than I possess. She has managed to gain the mastery over my father; no wonder that I—a mere boy—was not able to fight against her. It is impossible for me to live where she is—you have seen that. She has won the day, so far as I am concerned; I must admit it.'

'Then you should not admit anything of the kind,' said the colonel's daughter,

quickly, her southern blood firing up. 'She shall never triumph over *me*, and I think she understands that. I know how to manage her.'

'You know how to manage everybody, my dear Edith; no one would have the heart to quarrel with you. Even Mrs. Clavering is disarmed.'

His voice was gentle and caressing as he spoke, and he came and leaned over the young girl's chair.

'Do not trust Mrs. Clavering too far,' she said, looking up at him with a smile. 'Poor Geoffrey! You have been ill-used, and I know you could not have acted differently about it. It is too true that you cannot live in the same house with that woman—she was determined from the first that you should not. But it will all come right some day.'

'It is a long time about it.'

'Yes—but I am not so anxious for you as for your father—he seems so ill, and so broken-spirited. I am quite sure that he would have called you back often before now, only *her* influence over him is still too strong. He is old, and loves peace, and to differ with her on any subject means *war!*'

'Why, what a student of character you are!' said Clavering, with honest admiration.

'I have been obliged to study this person for all your sakes. I have not been living at Porthcawl for my own amusement.'

She spoke rather sadly, and her eyes were downcast.

'I know it, Edith—do not think that you have sacrificed yourself all this time in vain. No words can express my gratitude for what you have done for me.'

His voice and manner showed how deeply his feelings were stirred.

'Alas! I have done nothing, Geoffrey. All my plans have failed.'

'Do not say so,' replied Clavering, in the same tone of intense earnestness. 'You have saved me from despair. If you wished to do that amount of good for me, you have not failed!'

'But why should you despair, Geoffrey? The last time I saw you, you spoke like this, and I did not understand it. Why should you talk of despair?'

'Is there not enough in my life to cause it?' said he, in a weary tone.

'Not that I know of. Is there anything more than you have told me?'

Clavering turned his head away slightly, but his answer was clear and distinct.

'There is nothing—that is, nothing new. I ought to be used to it all by this time!'

Then, with a quick change of manner, he continued: 'We have had enough of my poor affairs—tell me something about my father. Do you say that he is ill?'

'I am afraid he is, but he always denies it. He seldom comes down to dinner now, and Mrs. Clavering and I dine alone. Later in the evening, I go and sit with your father. So you see your old home has not become more lively since you left it; but for me, I believe there would be another guest in the house to-day.'

'I cannot even guess whom you mean,' said Clavering, looking up surprised.

'No less a personage than Mr. Rafferty! The servants have often seen him about of late, and sometimes there has been another man with him. Mrs. Clavering will never give up the hope of smuggling her beloved Samuel into Porthcawl Castle, and I am afraid your father is getting too feeble to

resist her much longer. But she shall not succeed—at least, until I am gone.'

'It will be a long day before that happens, for we never mean to part with you.'

Anyone could have seen that this was by no means all that the young fellow had to say, but he stopped somewhat awkwardly, and walked towards the window. A score of times he had been on the point of expressing to the colonel's daughter all that he felt, but something invariably restrained him—his tongue seemed tied. Assuredly his embarrassment did not spring from any uncertainty in his own mind. The one absorbing passion of his life—all his thoughts and all his aspirations—centred round Edith Pendleton. It was true, as he had declared, that when she was at a distance he almost kept a reckoning of the hours that must elapse

before he could see her again. And yet, in her presence, he appeared to be half in dread of her—or of himself.

'You are not thinking of going away from Porthcawl?'

This was all he could find to say after some moments of silence; but his voice trembled.

'Indeed we are—papa has been anxious for a little change, and his health requires it. We have promised to return to Porthcawl Castle to-morrow, and next week we go to Paris. And now, Geoffrey, I have one thing to ask you.'

The young man turned to her hurriedly, and, as Edith seemed to hesitate, an uneasy feeling stole over him.

'What is it?' he said. 'I promise beforehand to do whatever you wish.'

'Make no rash promises, Geoffrey! What I want is that, when I am away, you

will go down to see your father as often as you can, in spite of that woman or of anybody else. You cannot live there, I admit; but you ought to look after your father a little more. Do not leave him entirely alone. I have reasons for pressing this upon you, and my father is going to speak to you about them—and about your returning to Porthcawl, at least for a day now and then. You will not refuse to listen to him?'

'If he does,' said the colonel, who had heard the last few words as he entered the room, 'we will turn him adrift in a Welsh coracle with his step-mother. But what is it he is to listen to me about?'

Clavering had risen to his feet as the colonel came in, and scrutinized him rather closely; for an instant he appeared to be in doubt as to the greeting he was to receive. But there was no change in the

Virginian's manner, no cloud on his brow. Now and then he dropped into a reverie, but he was as cordial as ever to the squire's son.

'I was beginning a lecture to him about the duty of his going to Porthcawl sometimes,' said Edith, with a little laugh.

'Ah, ah!—we have settled all that beforehand. Even Mrs. Clavering will be glad to see him now. But let us talk about it by-and-by—at present I am tired. So Rufus Snapper has not arrived yet? I wish I could have taken him with me to-night, he would have been interested; and, besides, he knows how to manage such people better than I do.'

The colonel leaned back in his chair, and began musing on what had passed between himself and Finch.

'Did you see your unknown correspondent?' asked his daughter.

'Indeed I did, and to all intents and purposes he remains unknown to me still. He lives in a queer place, and is altogether a very queer man. I should not like to have much to do with him. And then his daughter! That was a strange part of the business; evidently she has been a pretty woman in her day.' Once more the colonel's voice dropped, and he pursued the bent of his own reflections.

'You are determined to keep it all to yourself, papa,' said his daughter, going behind his chair, and stroking his face. 'Is it an adventure? Tell us about the daughter, at any rate—that will interest Geoffrey. Where is he? Oh, over there in the window. Come, Geoffrey! Listen to the romance of Garlick Hill!'

The young man came forward, and sat down before the colonel, who looked at him earnestly for a moment, as if he were

about to ask him a question. If he had any such intention, he instantly changed his purpose.

'Why should I worry him about it?' he thought. 'I will find out what the fellow means, and who he is, before I say anything to the poor boy. I dare say Finch has imposed upon him some time or other, and I suspect I should be doing the rascal's dirty work if I reminded Geoffrey of it now.'

These thoughts passed through his mind, and then he said aloud:

'My dear Edith, there is nothing much to tell. My correspondent is an impostor—about that I was not very long in doubt. If I had been, his daughter would have removed it.'

'That was rather strange,' remarked Clavering, so occupied with his own thoughts that apparently he took no more

than a courteous degree of interest in the colonel's narrative.

'So it struck me; but the fact is that the daughter puzzled me even more than the father. They are both persons of education—the man might have struck me rather favourably, if it had not been for a dissipated and reckless look about him. The story of *his* life has many a dark page in it, or I am much mistaken.'

'What did he want with you?' It was again Clavering who spoke.

'He wanted, as he tried to make out, to do me—or some of my friends—a good turn; but it was an odd affair from beginning to end. Before he had time to begin, his daughter gave me a pretty direct caution about *him*. As a matter of course, she knows more of his history than I do. They are in every way a mysterious couple.'

'And you say *she* is pretty, papa?'

'No, my dear, I did not say that. She *has* been pretty; not by any means the same thing. But there were signs of degradation even about her, and yet she made an impression upon me that I cannot either describe or shake off. She cannot be in league with her father, for she gave me to understand that his main object was to get money from me. In that he failed. To be sure, he raised the siege pretty quickly. At the first hint from me that I saw through his purpose, he stopped short. Perhaps he was afraid of scaring his bird away too soon.'

'And had he nothing to say after all, papa?'

'Next to nothing—dark hints and mysterious sayings, worthy of an oracle. I must say that I left the house with rather a confused idea of what he meant or what

he wished to do. I was to keep an eye upon your father, Geoffrey,' continued the colonel, laughing, 'and upon you, too, I think—let me see, what was it?' He tried, or seemed to try, to recollect, but again he resolved not to disturb the squire's son unnecessarily. 'It was nothing,' he went on; 'the vulgarest attempt to get money by false pretences! That is, I suspect, the beginning and end of it all. Why the man singled me out to experiment upon is more than I can tell. He held out a sort of promise of wonderful revelations, and, when it came to the point, they vanished into the air like smoke.'

'Revelations about whom? Why, this is a very incomplete romance of yours, my dear colonel.'

'So it is, Geoffrey,' replied the colonel, with a shrug, 'but the person responsible is my correspondent. He has left the

story with me in an unfinished state. The fact is, I must set Rufus Snapper at work upon him—the invaluable Snapper! By-the-bye, he goes down with us to Porthcawl to-morrow, Edith?'

'He promised, papa.'

'Then he will do it. We shall have him here the first thing in the morning, and we will all go together. Come, Geoffrey, I want a cigar, and I will walk with you to the Albany, by way of an excuse for taking it.'

'Do not forget to talk to him about going home,' said Edith, as she bade adieu to the squire's son—rather formally, as the colonel fancied, but a look of affection and confidence was exchanged between them which might have modified his opinion, had he perceived it.

'I will lecture him till he cries for mercy,' cried the colonel, gaily; and to-

gether the two men went out, and the colonel succeeded after a time in making Clavering promise that his visits to Porthcawl should be more frequent, whether his father's wife gave him a welcome or not. This being off his mind, the colonel reverted to his afternoon's visit.

'Some of these days,' he said, 'I must get you to go with me to see the oracle of Garlick Hill, for you may be able to deal with him more successfully than I am likely to do. Our American rogues are pretty tough customers to handle, but the Englishman who has gone in for professional swindling is worse. We will put off our city journey until Edith and I come back from Porthcawl. I promised to go and see your father again before taking flight to the continent, and I will keep my word. After that, let us look up my mysterious friend, and settle his account for him by

handing him over to the police. What do you say?'

'Of course I will do anything you like,' replied Clavering, carelessly, 'but I should scarcely have thought it worth your while to waste any more time upon him.'

'We never can tell; somehow my curiosity is aroused. Now, good night; a dreary place this Albany always seems to me; no light, no air, no sign of life; a spectral alley, haunted by the poor fellows who from time to time have come to grief in it. Do you remember Pipeclay who cut his throat up there in No.——? But I forgot—you still live here, and I don't. Well, now, be careful—and be sure you come to-morrow to say good-bye.'

The colonel turned to descend the steps towards the Albany court-yard, when a shabbily-dressed man went quickly past

him. He caught a partial glimpse of this man's face, and it brought him to a sudden halt.

'Well,' said he aloud, 'if *that* is not one of the ghosts, it is the very man I left this afternoon in the city—my begging-letter friend. What in the world can he want *here?*'

The man, whoever he was, turned round, and, seeing that the colonel was watching him, quickened his steps and was soon lost to view in the partial obscurity which is the natural atmosphere of the Albany for eight months out of the twelve.

The colonel stood for a moment or two deep in thought; then he shook his head rather sorrowfully, and resumed his walk home. He was silent and preoccupied the rest of the evening, and his daughter was alarmed lest the old wound should have

re-opened—the wound which she fondly hoped had closed for ever. Whether it was so or not, the colonel said not a word, but drew her to him as she retired, and returned her embrace even more tenderly than usual.

That night was the worst which the colonel had known since the evil times of 1864. Finch had not quite expended his ingenuity in vain.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WARNING.

After this visit to London,—especially after her conversation with Geoffrey Clavering, all unsatisfactory as it was to the young man—Porthcawl Castle seemed to be a brighter place in the eyes of Edith Pendleton. The squire welcomed her as if she had been absent a year or two; even Mrs. Clavering felt some pleasure at her return, or looked as if she did. As for the warmth of the reception which the lady of the house gave to Mr. Snapper, it might

have moved a man of stone. What could be more natural than her pleasure at seeing him, considering that he was the friend of her son—his best friend, as Rafferty himself had declared? Her determination to enlist Snapper on her side, at all costs, was stronger than ever; but the difficulties were great. If the Philadelphian had been a little more amenable to the female arts, as practised by her, the task would have been easier. Her innocent look, the frank manner which she knew so well how to assume, her mute appeals for sympathy, were all lost upon him. Still, every man has his weak moments, as every woman well knows, and Mrs. Clavering watched patiently for Rufus Snapper's. She paid him gentle little attentions which pleased him in spite of himself; she seemed to study his comfort even above that of other guests. Once or twice she contrived to get him to

take a stroll with her alone about the gardens or the neighbourhood. The cottages were old, the cottagers were quaint and original. Snapper was not only interested, but amused to see how well his old friend, Polly Rafferty, played the part of Lady Bountiful.

'She does it as if she had been born to it,' he remarked to Colonel Pendleton; 'I declare I think our women are the smartest in the world. They come over here strangers, all at sea about everything, but it does not take them long to get the hang of the school-house. Have you ever noticed what a lot of them settle down here when once they come? More than I like to see, that's a fact. I shall be glad when we get Edith back again—we can't afford to have another international match, colonel!'

'There is no necessity to talk about

anything of that kind, at present.' And then, by a chain of ideas which Mr. Snapper was secretly grieved to see, the colonel added, 'By the way, why did you not go to see young Clavering while we were in London? After all, there is no one in whom he trusts so much as you.'

'But he is not in any trouble?' said Snapper, quickly.

'I do not know; sometimes I have my doubts. You have his entire confidence, Snapper; it is not for you to ask information from *me!*'

'Well,' replied Snapper, evidently trying to avoid the subject, as he invariably did, 'I could not go to see him because I was in Birmingham, looking after my dear friend, Sam Rafferty.'

'Then I hope you were well employed. You and this Rafferty seem to have arrived at a pretty good understanding. Did I tell

you that I heard a good deal about him from that man Finch?'

'What did you hear?' asked Snapper, with a little more eagerness than he was wont to exhibit.

'I heard enough to make me suspect that Rafferty is married to Finch's daughter, and that it is hushed up for fear of offending our hostess here, who might stop the supplies.'

'He led you to think that, did he?' said Snapper, thoughtfully. 'If that is so, Finch's daughter has not exactly drawn a prize in the lottery.'

'Mind you, I learned nothing from *her*. I fancied once that she was on the point of telling me everything, but her father came in before she had time. As for Finch, he is a desperado in his way.'

Now Rufus Snapper could have told his friend far more about Finch than he was

likely to find out for himself. He had, in fact, often had dealings with Finch, and was that very moment in negotiations with him. But he had reasons of his own for keeping all this a secret from the colonel.

'He does not seem to have made a very good impression on you,' said he, endeavouring to bring his friend out.

'By no means. He has that strange appearance which we so seldom see in Americans—all gin-sodden and gone to pieces. Do you know, Rufus, I should like very much to introduce you to him.'

'Thank you,' replied Snapper, drily, 'it will not be necessary. I dare say I shall have something to do with him before very long! Here comes Mrs. Clavering—have you noticed how much better the squire looks? I see a great change in him since I was here last.'

'Tell his wife so—it will please her,'

said the colonel, with his usual simplicity.

They were walking by the rocky path which led to the solitary little house where Snapper had overheard part of the conversation between Rafferty and his mother. As Mrs. Clavering approached, Snapper saluted her with his accustomed gravity, and would have passed on, but the colonel prevented him.

'We were saying,' he remarked to his hostess, 'that my old friend's health has much improved of late. Mr. Snapper, who is a stranger, notices it more than we do.'

'We all notice it,' said the lady, with the vivacity which never failed to delight the colonel. 'Since you were here, Mr. Snapper, my husband has been rapidly recovering his former health, although we cannot get him to relinquish his invalid habits. Sometimes we do not see him

downstairs all day. You must try to get him out, you gentlemen, while you are with us. Give him some of your excellent advice, Mr. Snapper. You have still a little in reserve, I hope?'

Her coolness did not astonish Snapper now; yet, when he remembered what had been the nature of his last advice to her, he was almost taken by surprise.

'It is encouraging to find that good counsel is not always thrown away,' he said, quietly.

'Then persevere, my dear Mr. Snapper. See Mr. Clavering, and persuade him to go a little more into the world again. You men cannot stand being shut up, as we can. You get the dry rot; a few weeks of isolation, and your energy is gone. We women may be out of the world for months at a time, and yet we reappear the same as ever.'

'Better than ever,' replied Snapper,

tempted for once to pay a compliment. 'See how much you have improved since I first knew you.'

'I was only a raw girl then, Mr. Snapper. We will not go back quite so far as that. Where has the colonel disappeared all at once?' she asked, after looking round carefully. 'A moment ago he was here. Have you spirited him away, or has he gone off to smoke his eternal cigar?' Certainly he was no longer to be seen. He had turned down one of the little paths, and Snapper looked after him in vain. 'Charming man, the colonel,' continued the lady—'quite a knight of the olden time, full of honour and courage. How pleasant, and how rare, it is to meet such men.'

This was not the first time she had sung the praises of Colonel Pendleton to Snap-

per, and, in spite of his habitual distrust of her, he listened with pleasure.

'Everybody now is so selfish and so sordid,' she continued, in her most engaging tones. 'I am very sure that your friend, the colonel, never thought of himself, when there were others to be thought *of* or *for*.'

'You have truly discerned his character, madam,' said Snapper; and then for a few yards they walked on in silence.

Then the lady again spoke.

'You do not know,' she said, 'how difficult has been my position here, or how many have been my anxieties. There has been my husband's ill-health, and, far worse even, the troubles caused by my unhappy son!'

'Now she is coming to it,' thought Snapper.

'No one knows what I have gone through on his account. Tell me, and forgive my asking you—have you ever found out who are his real associates? Who are the people in London that he is continually going to see?'

'Has he refused to tell you himself?' said Snapper, pursuing his evasive tactics.

'He will not answer my questions, or, if he does, I fear he deceives me. It is almost impossible,' she added, with energy, 'to deal with a person who has no idea what truth means.'

'So she is beginning to find that out, is she?' thought Snapper.

'Now Sam never hesitates to mislead me —I might use a much stronger word.'

'You might, indeed,' thought Snapper, 'for he is the very prince of liars.'

'In large matters or in small, it is all the same. He never opens his mouth but

to deceive. And then, what becomes of all the money I send him? Oh, Mr. Snapper, it is hard to have one's life overshadowed by the conduct of one's own child. Such is my lot! I am aware that you must know it already, for, if I had not spoken, you are acquainted with my son, and must have judged him only too truly. My life is being destroyed by the very person who ought to have been its greatest happiness.'

Her voice trembled, and her face had become pale.

'This at least is genuine,' thought Snapper, and he felt a compassion for the mother which he would have denied to the woman. 'She does not yet know,' he thought, 'what an utter scoundrel her son is.'

'If I were you,' he said aloud, 'I would send Sam off to seek his fortune abroad.

Give him a fair start, and let him understand that you will do no more for him. It is your only hope—and *his* too, for the matter of that. No doubt he has formed very bad associates——'

'You mean, in London?' interrupted the mother.

'He never consults me about his London friends. I should judge that they were not likely to be of any great use to him in life. You have seen him here lately?'

'He has been here, not always with my will. And I have heard that some companion of his came down with him once or twice, and lodged in the town yonder for a night or two; one of his gambling associates, I fear. But you will take no notice of this in the house,' she said, in a low voice, as they drew near the Castle. 'I may not have your sympathy in all

things, Mr. Snapper, but I claim it in this! My husband will be with us at dinner to-night, and neither there nor at any other time should I like any allusion made to my unhappy son!'

'There will be no necessity for mentioning him, I hope,' replied Snapper, cautiously.

'I have concealed all my anxieties from Mr. Clavering, as it was my duty to do. If he continues to get better, I will try to induce him to leave Porthcawl for a time. Perhaps he would go with you to Paris? There is no one he is so glad to be with as his friend the colonel. I, too, shall be delighted with the change; this is not the most cheerful place in the world, especially when you have scarcely been out of sight of the old walls for six months. What would you say to this plan if he proposed it?'

'I should say that it was not a bad plan,' replied the Philadelphian, after a short consideration. 'But I should scarcely have thought the squire was fit to travel.'

Mr. Snapper altered his opinion before the dinner was over that night. Roland Clavering was, to all appearance, the youngest and gayest of the party. In his best days, he had been famous for his brilliant conversation and quick repartee; no topic that could be brought forward came amiss to him; no sudden change in it found his natural alertness and versatility at fault. He put all around him in good humour, and no one ever rose from the table on such occasions without feeling sorry that the evening was over.

So it was now. The squire had again enjoyed a few hours of good health and good spirits—a rare conjunction in these

days. Even his own wife felt a little proud of him.

'He is a wonderful man,' said Snapper to the colonel, as they sat up smoking. 'I never before saw him to so much advantage. How well he tells an anecdote, and how polished is his manner! That manner we never see in the younger generation. Take him to Paris! I should like to live with him the rest of my life. Did he say anything about Paris, by-the-by?'

'Not a word. To-morrow we will propose it, and, as soon as we can, we will carry him off. Edith will be delighted; and we will share Mrs. Clavering between us, unless you like to take her under your own charge, Rufus. You walked off with her very cleverly to-day. Evidently you begin to find her an interesting woman.'

'Very,' said Snapper, sententiously, throwing away his cigar. 'Now I am off,

for I hate to disturb people late at night, and, when you shut a door in this house, the echoes go rumbling along the passages for half-an-hour afterwards. So good-night, my dear colonel; we are the last up; everybody else went to bed long ago.'

But Mr. Snapper was mistaken. In the long and lofty room where the traces of so many dark deeds of former times had been brought to light, Roland Clavering still sat, motionless and silent. He had been reading, but the book had dropped from his hand to the floor. Then he had fallen into a state between sleeping and waking, and strange dreams led him far away, and faces which he knew looked into his own. Once his wife entered the room, but, finding him asleep, she noiselessly withdrew. Yet sometimes he was fully awake, and then he took up his book and read for a space—his ordinary habit of keeping late

vigils having grown stronger since his illness, so that he scarcely noticed the hours as they passed by.

On this night, he had been dreaming and brooding, and an unwonted tranquillity settled upon his spirit. The evening had left behind it a sort of pleasant fragrance. At last he roused himself, or imagined that he did so, and looked about him, and saw, with no sense of surprise, that he was no longer alone. But whether he was in actual contact with the things of this world, or saw them in a vision, he would have found it hard to decide.

On the opposite side of the hearth, seen clearly in the light of the fire, was his brother Basil—the favourite brother, who had gone out while still a boy to Mexico. Thence had come, scattered over the long years, letters descriptive of his wild and adventurous life; of his mines, and of

the dangers and trials attendant upon the care of his property ; of sudden attacks by roving bands of Mexican freebooters, and still more desperate raids of fierce Apaches, most warlike and blood-thirsty of all the red men yet surviving the ruin of their race. Once or twice the writer of these letters had spoken of revisiting his home, but he was looked for in vain ; and then the letters themselves ceased to come, and the sorrowful conviction forced itself home upon Roland Clavering's mind that his brother was dead. And now he was visibly present, once more under his father's roof—older and more careworn than when he said farewell to home and kindred a score of years ago, but otherwise unchanged.

Yet, when Roland Clavering shook off his drowsiness, and looked at his brother, his first thought was of the ancient legend

of his house, which told of the power of members of the family to return even from beyond the grave, and give warning of approaching peril; and, so thinking, he said within himself,

'It is true then, as I feared—my brother Basil is dead!'

This was a passing superstition, and it vanished when he heard his brother's voice, firm and clear in all its tones as of old,

'I saw that you were asleep when I came in,' he said, 'and I would not disturb you. You have been ill, brother, and are still weak. You need care and rest; is it possible that they are not to be had *here?*'

'When did you come?' asked Roland Clavering, still a little bewildered, 'and how is it that no one told me you were here?'

'I came an hour ago, and would not permit anyone to announce my arrival to you. Do I need any guidance in the old house? I knew that you were in this room and alone—that was enough. It is long since we have held communication with each other, my brother! What a happiness it is to be with you again!'

The firelight flickered on his face as he spoke, and lent a glow of colour to his pale cheeks.

Roland Clavering passed his hand across his brow, and seemed to be endeavouring to call his faculties together.

'I do not know what has come over me,' he said, 'but of late I have felt almost unequal to any kind of exertion. Perhaps it is that I am old, or feeble, but I am weighed down with a lassitude that I cannot shake off. I think half my time is spent in a sort of stupor. If I had

known you had been coming, Basil, there should not have been wanting a warm welcome. I cannot quite understand it even now.'

He looked hard, and half doubtingly, at his brother as he spoke.

'My dear Roland, there is nothing difficult to understand. I am here, as you see, and only too glad to find you thus alone. I have come from the midst of dangers to a place of safety—and of peace! All was turmoil and anxiety in Mexico; it was an existence which could not last. Now it has come to an end, and I am home again. Much has changed; of all our family—father, mother, seven brothers—there are but two left. Yet it is but the other day we were all gathered together in this room. All gone but two!'

'You forget that our brother Claude is living; it was but a few weeks ago that I

heard from him. There are three still left.'

Basil Clavering listened, and his look seemed to penetrate his brother's soul.

'There are but two,' he repeated, in somewhat sadder tones. 'I have later news from Claude than you.'

'Is he in any peril?'

'Not now. But we will not speak of him at present. It is about you that I am anxious. Tell me, who is in the house? There are visitors, I know—but who are they?'

Roland told him, and again Basil was silent for a moment. Then he said,

'They are not the visitors I mean; I was thinking of some one very different. But I remember now that he is not in the house; you have never seen him here.'

Roland looked up astonished.

'Who could be here,' he asked, 'with-

out my knowing it? You speak in riddles, Basil. I am concerned about you—your long journey, your anxieties, have affected you. Surely you need refreshment; let me summon my servant.'

'I need nothing, Roland,' said the brother, with a smile. 'Sit down again.'

The visitor made a gesture, and Roland Clavering obeyed it, like a man under a spell. The lateness of the hour, fatigue, surprise—all together had apparently benumbed him.

'There are visitors here sometimes whom you do not hear of,' continued Basil, 'and the man I have seen is one of them.'

'You have seen him here to-night?'

'It matters not when—he has been here, and I know that he will return soon. The hour I cannot tell; if I could, I should no longer tremble for you. I see the cata-

strophe, but not the time when it is to fall upon you. All that is hidden from me!'

He uttered a smothered cry, and a dreadful thought began to steal over the mind of Roland Clavering—the thought that his brother was mad.

'I am forbidden to know when or how to meet this danger, but I can do my errand—I can warn you. Do not look as if you distrusted me; my mind is as clear as yours, and what I have to say you can never hear so well as now. You do wrong in leading this lonely life. You might be seized with mortal illness, and no one would be ready to aid you. Your voice would sound like a mere cry from the wild sea outside. Night after night you are here alone, and you treat your life as if it were a thing of nought to yourself and to others. Think of those others, if not

of yourself—think of your son, who is in sore straits. You are dreaming your life away. Rouse yourself—it may not be too late.' Then he continued, as if to himself—'If I could only see the *time* when it is to take place! This partial knowledge is worse than useless; it will but mislead us both.'

'Roland,' he continued, aloud, 'you must leave this house, and soon. Seek change of scene, change of thought. Ceaselessly you are regretting one false step—your marriage!—knowing well how vain are all such regrets. Do not allow yourself to be overwhelmed by a single misjudged act. Again I remind you that you have interests to defend, vital to yourself and to your kindred; that your son is in need of his father! A great cloud lowers darkly over our house—it is to tell you this that I am here, and to bid you

rouse yourself, and meet the storm.' A vivid meaning seemed to be imparted to his words by a tremendous gust of wind which beat as he spoke against the walls, shaking them almost to their foundations. 'I repeat—it is a warning that I bring; your instinct whispered that to you when first your eyes fell upon me to-night, for the Claverings are and must be faithful to each other, in life or in death. And now I leave you, for I am weary. Trust me to find my way to my rest alone'—and here a strange, sad smile came upon the speaker's lips—'I know my room; the room in which I slept when I was a boy. Good-night! The hour is late, and we must part.'

He made a sign of adieu; his brother tried to rise, but could not; the stranger passed on through the corridor towards the chamber which was associated with

the happy memories of youth. A few minutes afterwards, the clock in the court below struck the hour of two, and for a time a dead silence was over all the house.

CHAPTER V.

THE WARNING FULFILLED.

No one could have told how long this silence lasted; it was only known that, in the dead of night, a terrible cry rung through the house, and scarcely had the echoes of it died away when the same cry was repeated, but more faintly, and nothing more was heard—nothing but the rushing sound of the rising wind outside, and the beating of the waves against the rocks below.

Colonel Pendleton heard both these

cries—the first while still half-unconscious in sleep; the second when he was perfectly awake. He sprang from his bed, and tried to make out from what direction they had proceeded. There was nothing to guide him; for within the house all was again wrapped in silence. But he felt sure that he was not the victim of an illusion, and a prescience of disaster weighed heavily upon his mind. He hurried on his garments, and went out into the corridor, and listened again. There, the din of the winds and waves could not be heard so distinctly, and any movement within the Castle would have reached his ears. At first there was none. Presently, somewhere in the hall, there was a slight rustling, perhaps of rats or mice; then the colonel fancied he heard the sounds of a rapidly retreating footstep. He followed these sounds, but was soon convinced that

they were nothing but the creaking of the old wainscoting, and the rattling of the wind against the casements in the hall. No one but himself was stirring; and yet, if that had been a real cry, surely it would have been heard by others?

He returned, doubtful and uneasy, to his room, and lit a lamp. Suddenly his heart gave a great bound; he recollected that his daughter slept near the long gallery, and from somewhere thereabouts the cry had seemed to issue. He went forth again, and made his way quickly to Edith's room. The passages were quite dark, and the candle which he carried shed only a feeble ray in the blackness. The colonel tapped upon the door of the room, first gently, then a little louder. There was no answer. An eternity seemed to be passing. He tapped again, impatiently,

and called his daughter twice by her name. This brought a response.

'Is it you, father? Has anything happened?'

'Nothing, my child, but I fancied I heard a cry.'

'So did I—a dreadful cry.' She had partially opened the door. 'Do you think anyone is ill?'

'I cannot tell—there is not a sound in the house now.'

'Can it be the squire?'

'The cry I heard was not that of a man! But go to sleep again—after all, it may only have been the wind. It is a rough night; a gale is blowing hard, and we know what tricks the wind can play in this old house. Good-night, my child.'

He retraced his steps, and stood listening, and went to the squire's bed-room, but

everything seemed as usual. Then he went to the library, where he knew the squire was in the habit of sitting up late, but no light came from under the door. He touched the handle with the intention of entering the room—what prevented him? He could not tell; he only knew that the belief he had been dreaming suddenly took a strong hold upon him, and he went back to his chamber smiling at his own folly. But he could not sleep. He took up a volume which lay upon the table by his side, and turned over its pages; the words passed before his eyes, but their meaning was a blank. Ordinarily a man of iron nerve, he had been thrown into a state of restlessness which he could neither control nor explain.

With the first gleam of dawn, he decided to go down to the sea-shore, knowing from old experience the sovereign power of nature

to disperse the gloomy phantoms of the mind. He descended the stairs, and with difficulty opened the heavy outer door. The gale was still raging, and the spray from the sea dashed heavily in the colonel's face as he turned from the shelter of the house to the open beach.

Evidently it had been a night of tempest; the foam lay far up upon the rocks, and even on the slopes of the grassy hills beyond. A few days previously, a coasting vessel had been cast ashore, and a tug had been sent to rescue her. Colonel Pendleton was astonished to find that both had disappeared. He walked along for some distance, and saw that the vessel and the tug had been driven far round a dangerous point, and dashed to pieces on the rocks. Huge pieces of iron and wood strewed the beach for miles. A group of men and women could be descried

hastening to the scene, from a path down a cliff. They were the first of a band of wreckers from a distant village ; the hurricane which had shaken their dwellings had also held out a promise that the sea would have its booty for them, and they were not disappointed.

It was still early when Colonel Pendleton returned to the Castle, and the servants were not astir. He re-entered the house, and was on the point of going to his own room, when he remembered that from the windows of the library the whole of the stretch of beach which he had just left could be commanded. He was curious to see whether the wreckers were already at work ; therefore he opened the door of the library and went in. The shutters were closed, and the curtains were closely drawn. It was night still in this room. The moment the colonel crossed the thres-

hold, a strange feeling passed over him, and for a moment arrested his steps. It was the feeling that he was not alone.

For an instant he paused, and then, by the aid of the light which came in from the door, he advanced to the nearest window, and unfastened it. It looked out upon the ancient churchyard below, but this was not the end of the room facing the shore where the wrecks had been cast. He moved on towards the fire-place, and noticed that a deep arm-chair was drawn in front of it, near a small table. He passed behind the chair, and drew the curtains of another window, and saw at once the people at the wreck, fastening like so many vultures on their prey. After watching this scene for a few minutes, he turned round and uttered a low cry—a cry of horror, wrung from him by a sight which seemed more ghastly than anything he had

ever witnessed, even on the battlefield. Roland Clavering was sitting in his chair, staring at him with affrighted eyes, appealing to him silently for help. The colonel ran up to him and took his hand, and then saw that he had been dead for hours. Blood had flowed from a deep wound under his breast; he had been stabbed to the heart, and the colonel doubted whether there had been time for the victim even to raise the cry which he had heard.

He glanced hurriedly round, and saw in the fireplace, nearly covered by the ashes, an object that at once rivetted his attention. He took it up, and found that he had in his hand the weapon with which the deed had been done—a long-bladed knife, with a handle of buckhorn. The blade was scarcely yet dry, and Colonel Pendleton laid it upon the table with a shudder. Nothing in the room showed the least sign of disarrange-

ment; there could have been no struggle, for the small table on which had been placed a caraffe of water, some books, and candles stood close to the chair, and if the person sitting in the chair had made any sudden movement, it must have been upset. Evidently the murderer had given his victim no time either for entreaty or defence.

Colonel Pendleton's first thought was to send off messengers for the doctor and the police—the first, he knew, could do no good, and his confidence in the second was not great. He had more hope of getting some light thrown upon the crime by Rufus Snapper.

'Prevent Edith coming here,' he said, as soon as his friend entered the library, 'and perhaps you had better keep Mrs. Clavering away too. She can do no good. The servants have told her what has happened

—the doctor will be here in half-an-hour. He never could have helped our poor friend; it must have been done in an instant, at one stroke. We must send for his son; these people round about us are all bewildered. You and I must do the best we can till Geoffrey Clavering comes. There is nothing to make one suspect that this is the work of thieves; the squire's rings and watch are *there*—I saw them when I took his hand. Once in the night I thought I heard a cry—but I came out and looked about, and all was so quiet that I concluded I was mistaken. Did you hear anything?'

'Not a sound,' said Snapper, in a whisper. He was appalled by what had taken place and by the thoughts which crowded into his mind. 'Perhaps I might have prevented this,' he murmured; 'I waited too long.'

'When I saw that man Finch,' said the colonel, also speaking in a low voice,—for neither could forget for a moment the awful object which the room contained,—'he alluded vaguely to some danger which hung over the family. Could he have had any idea of *this?*'

'I am sure he had not—no one who did this night's work would have let Finch into his secret. He may have suspected something, as I do—that is all. Depend upon it, he will not be able to help us.'

'You suspect some one?'

'I do—but I must keep my own counsel—even from you, colonel.'

'*Not* his wife?' whispered the colonel, aghast.

'The stab is not her work. No—I do not suspect her! The poor squire! It is plain that he was doomed. I have seen it for a long time. If that knife had not

struck him his life was marked for destruction all the same; the hand of fate is here! Come upstairs with me into my room; we cannot talk in this place. What is it that one of the servants says about having heard his master's voice very late, as if in conversation?'

'His valet says something of the sort—fancies he heard two voices. It must be inquired into, but I am convinced the man is mistaken. The squire had a habit of talking to himself, as you know, and that is all the man heard. There was no anger in the tones, he says, only a friendly conversation. He thought it was between me and the squire; just a few sounds reached him as he passed the door. There is nothing in it, be sure.'

Snapper had opened the door, and they were going out together when they were both startled by the appearance of the

squire's wife. The colonel came forward and led her into an adjoining room.

'It is better that you should not go in there at present,' he said.

The lady's face was almost as bloodless as that of her husband; the horror of the shock had utterly unnerved her.

'It is true, then,' she said, 'this fearful news? You have seen him?'

'I have, but he must have been dead for several hours. I have seen death too often to be mistaken.'

'Where was he?—not in his own room, the servants say.'

'He was here in the library; the murderer must have come upon him in his sleep. It was probably all done in a moment, and yet I am convinced I heard cries. I cannot understand it, but the police may help us when they come.'

The wife buried her face in her hands

for a moment, and then appeared to make an effort to recover something like composure. Her lips were firmly compressed and her voice no longer trembled.

'You have sent for his son—for Geoffrey? He must come; there has been a sad misunderstanding between us, which would have been set right had my poor husband lived a little longer. Now it is too late. This is Geoffrey's proper place; he need scarcely know that I am in the house, and in a few days I will go away. I am helpless now; the only friend I had is gone! But you, colonel—surely you will assist us? You will not allow the man who has committed this awful crime to escape?' She looked anxiously into his face, and laid the ends of her fingers upon his arm.

'Not if it is in my power to prevent it, you may be sure,' he replied, kindly but firmly. 'The police will soon be at work,

but I shall not depend upon them alone. There must be something to guide us soon —already Mr. Snapper has his suspicions.'

'He has!' exclaimed the lady, drawing a deep breath.

'But of whom, I know not. It is better, no doubt, that for the present he should keep silence.'

'Have you anything to aid you in your search,' asked Mrs. Clavering, after a pause; her voice was husky; she seemed to speak with difficulty.

'There is the knife with which he was stabbed—that may be all important. We have not yet thoroughly searched the room—I have given orders that the room shall be left precisely as I found it. Depend upon it, everything that is possible will be done. *His* look when I first saw him seemed to be an appeal for aid—I was too late to render that, but if I can avenge

him, I will! I will never rest till his assassin is on the scaffold.'

There was an expression in the colonel's face which Mrs. Clavering had never seen there before; she shuddered as if a deadly chill had struck her.

'You have need of repose,' said the colonel, in a gentler tone; 'this shock has been almost too much for us all. If you will go to your room, I will let you know as soon as Mr. Clavering arrives; and, as for all the rest, pray trust to me!'

She had turned away, and was near the door when she suddenly stopped, and seemed to deliberate within herself. Presently she looked up, and said:

'It would be my wish to offer a reward —a large reward—for the discovery of the' murderer, she was apparently about to say, but she hesitated, and then added, 'of the guilty person. But I am poor, and have

little of my own to give. Mr. Snapper may have told you something of my position before my marriage,' she said, bitterly; 'in that case, you will know that I had nothing but the private allowance I received from my husband. A little of that I have saved—let it, at least, be added to any reward that may be offered.'

'It shall be as you desire; now let me beg of you to seek a little rest. The murderer has escaped for the moment, but I feel assured that we shall bring him to justice sooner or later. Have no fears!'

These last words sounded strangely to the lady; she again looked hard at the colonel, but in his frank face she saw nothing to disquiet her. She held out her hand, and he led her to the door. She walked with her usual firm step to her room, but, when she found herself alone,

she sank down upon a couch like one who had suddenly lost all strength—her face was once more buried between her hands, and convulsive sobs shook her frame. When this paroxysm had subsided, she lay with closed eyes, scarcely breathing, apparently asleep. Of all that went on outside the room she was unconscious; one might almost have thought that the dread visitor had invaded the house a second time that day, and that she had gone to join the dead.

Half-an-hour—an hour—hours passed away, and still she scarcely stirred. In that half-darkened chamber, the day seemed to be rapidly waning. At last she looked around, as if doubtful where she was. She fancied she heard the sound of strange voices in the house—probably of the police. She put her hand to her heart and breathed hard. Her eyes were at-

tracted to a small blue vase, in which her husband had placed a flower for his own room. She mechanically took it in her hand, but she was still trembling, and much shaken; the vase slipped through her nerveless fingers, and fell to the ground with a crash that startled her.

She summoned up all her strength, passed her hands over her hair, and opened the door, in the hope of hearing or seeing some one go by. What was taking place downstairs? Had any fresh disaster happened—anything to give her a new shock? She was eager to resolve her doubts, and yet something restrained her from ringing for her maid. She dreaded seeing any of the servants. She paced up and down her room feverishly, sometimes sitting down at the table and writing a note or two, destroyed almost as soon as written. At last she became more calm, and applied

herself with steadfast purpose to a letter which seemed to require some care and deliberation, for she hesitated often, and sometimes read a sentence over to herself half-aloud. Finally she seemed to be satisfied, for she put the letter in an envelope, directed it, and was about to ring for a servant, when once more she seemed undecided.

'For *his* sake,' she murmured, 'I must not run the smallest risk. Already his imprudence may have imperilled everything. Even the address on this letter might excite attention—that spy upon me and upon him would not hesitate to intercept it altogether. He would say that the end justified the means!

'And I,' she continued, taking up the letter again and turning it over and over, 'should I be right in recommending him

to do this? He must not come here now; but, if he were to go away altogether, might it not attract suspicion? How do I know that he has not fled already, and then what could this letter do but harm? As for this Philadelphian, I must get over my fear of him, and at once. Whatever he may suspect, it is fitting that I should know it. His look just now was not easily mistaken, but, if he imagines that I will cower down before him, it is time to undeceive him. Why should I not go and see him—in his own room, if necessary—and this moment? There can be nothing gained by delay; it had better be done before Geoffrey Clavering arrives.'

In the course of a minute or two, while these thoughts surged through her mind, she had become a changed woman. Her paleness was succeeded by a flush; her

eyes were clear and resolute. She went to her dressing-table and looked at herself in the glass.

'I will do it,' she said, with all her old energy revived, and, after thrusting her letter into the fire, she left the room.

She went on towards that part of the house where her present guests were bestowed. Her determination being once fixed, there was no longer any faltering in her thoughts or actions. She would have carried out her purpose had all the universe stood in her way.

Mr. Rufus Snapper was searching in a diary for the entries relating to certain visits which he had paid to Birmingham during the previous two years, and making a little note or two occasionally on a slip of paper. While thus employed, he heard a knock, twice repeated, and supposing it to be a servant, who would presently enter

with his message as a matter of course, he did not look up from his task, until the rustle of a woman's dress followed the sound of a closed door. Then he saw standing before him the wife of his late host. She was much more self-possessed than Mr. Snapper himself, and looked at him with perfect composure, whereas the Philadelphian fidgetted with his papers, and seemed decidedly uneasy.

'I have something to say to you, Mr. Snapper,' she said, 'and I have come here to say it because I presume we shall be undisturbed.'

He looked doubtfully at her for a moment, and then he passed round the table, and offered her a chair. This done, he went back to his papers.

'I have taken this step,' said the lady, 'in order that we may understand each other. You have said many strange things

to me since you have been in this house—for old acquaintance sake, I suppose. It is time now that you dealt openly with me, and I am determined that there shall be no misunderstanding, so far as I am concerned.'

Mr. Snapper bowed, but made no remark.

'Your mysteries may be interesting in ordinary times,' continued Mrs. Clavering, 'but, in the presence of a great tragedy such as that which has happened in this house, I think they ought to be put aside as mere child's play. Some weeks ago you gave me a vague sort of warning about my husband. Had you any idea that he was in danger?'

'I confess I had.'

'From what source?'

Mr. Snapper hesitated for a moment, and the widow made an impatient movement.

'You can scarcely refuse to tell me that now,' she said.

'It is unnecessary to tell you now, madam,' replied Snapper, in his hard way, 'because I do not believe that the blow which has fallen has come from the same source.'

'Then your suspicions were unjust?'

'I do not say that. If you remember, the squire was very ill, and recovered from his illness. With those circumstances, the crime of last night has nothing to do. Such, at least, is my present opinion.'

Mrs. Clavering reflected for a few instants, and then she put another question.

'I want you to be perfectly frank with me, Mr. Snapper,' she said. 'Had you any reason yesterday to think that my husband was in danger?'

'I had not, madam, or perhaps what has happened would *not* have happened.'

'But you knew that his life was threatened by somebody?'

She looked Snapper steadily in the face as she spoke, and he watched her with a sort of critical interest.

'What I knew or thought on that point, madam, I cannot state now, and, if I could, it would be useless. No doubt the day will come when I shall be able to speak. You may trust me that I would do it at once if any good was likely to come of it.'

'And so you do not think,' continued the widow, in a tone not free from irony, 'that what you know—or think you know—ought to be told?'

'I must be my own judge as to the time for making my disclosures—such as they are—and the person to whom I make them.'

'Are they very serious?'

'It must be for others to judge.'

'Do you mean the police?'

'Yes; I shall tell them all that I know; what I merely suspect, I shall for the present keep to myself.'

The lady's ironical mood seemed now to have been exchanged for one of the deepest seriousness. She saw that Mr. Snapper was quite imperturbable, and that he was not to be moved either by sarcasms or by an air of indignation. Therefore she inwardly resolved not to try either again.

'What you say seems to be reasonable,' she said, 'for your suspicions might do injury to an innocent person. But I cannot understand why you should have interested yourself so much in my poor husband of late.'

'It is because he was always the kind friend of my most dear friends, Colonel Pendleton and his daughter. And there

were other circumstances—it is needless to go into them.'

'You persist, then, in your mysterious attitude! Have you considered *my* position—my husband killed, one of his guests avowing that he suspected the squire's life was in danger, and yet refusing to do more than let fall scattered hints which may do infinite mischief! Is this the manly course to take? Do you suppose I have no interest in discovering the murderer of my husband?'

'Doubtless you have,' said Snapper, feeling a touch of pity for the woman who stood so courageously at bay, 'but, believe me, there would be nothing gained by premature action on my part. I will move when it is time—not before.'

'I do not understand what you mean about time?'

'I mean simply this: when I am sure that the proofs of guilt can be brought home to the murderer, I will speak, as loudly as you please—till then, I intend to be silent.'

Mrs. Clavering rose from her chair, and Snapper fancied that he saw a smile flit over her face. But there was no trifling in her words or manner.

'Will you answer me one question,' she said, 'the only one I need trouble you with after what you have said.'

'I will do so, madam, if I can.'

'Who is it that you suspect of committing this murder?'

'I cannot answer that question.'

'Why not? Surely there can be no harm in telling *me*—the wife!'

'I have reasons for not divulging my suspicions, the force of which you would be the first to acknowledge.'

'At least you cannot refuse to tell me what these reasons are?'

'That also I must decline. If I am right in my conjectures, you will not fail to know it! If I am wrong, no one shall hear anything about my error, and no harm will have been done.'

'And that is all I may expect from you?' said the lady, with what seemed to Snapper a deep and hidden meaning.

'That is all I can say, with any prudent regard for others.'

A dark and angry glance shot from the lady's eyes, but in a moment she resumed her self-control.

'As I am a helpless woman,' she said—'doubly helpless now—of course I must submit to being kept in the dark about what concerns me vitally. Perhaps Mr. Geoffrey Clavering, when he comes, may be more considerate. He has the right to

interfere—it is scarcely necessary for me to say that I recognise no right whatever on your part.'

This was her last note of defiance, and it took effect upon Snapper.

'I shall remain in the house but a few hours longer, madam, my interference will then not be seen.'

'Nor *felt*, as I am much inclined to believe. I do not pretend to know your wonderful secret, but I suspect that it is a delusion.'

'I hope with all my heart it is, madam,' said Snapper, in great sincerity, opening the door for her.

'I would hope so too, if I dared,' she thought, passing onwards to her room.

CHAPTER VI.

ROUSING THE TIGRESS.

Thomas Finch was walking down Fleet Street on his way home, after a day spent in various ingenious, but unsuccessful, devices to recruit his finances, when a placard spread out by the side of the pavement arrested his attention. It announced in large letters 'a dreadful murder in Wales,' and although Finch would have had, as a rule, too good an opinion of the value of a penny to spend it in a newspaper, yet curiosity led him to buy one on

the present occasion, and even to retire hurriedly with it into a doorway, where he turned over the damp sheet until his eager eyes lit upon the news of the evening.

It described the murder at Porthcawl Castle, and set forth how mysterious were all the circumstances; no stranger had been seen about; no robbery had been committed. The murdered man's valet had fancied he heard his master in conversation with some one at a late hour, but no visitor had arrived at the Castle that night, and the regular guests had all retired to their rooms. The valet must, therefore, have been mistaken. For the rest, the newspaper spoke of a 'clue' which had been found in the shape of a knife, with which doubtless the murder had been committed, and this clue was sure to lead to the arrest of the assassin. The horror of the son, who had arrived late in the afternoon,

and the grief of the widow, were also dwelt upon with much pathos by the accomplished reporter.

Tragic as the story was, it did not appear to distress Thomas Finch very deeply. As he resumed his course towards St. Paul's, his pace was somewhat quickened, his hat was again inclined a little over his left ear, a sure sign that his spirits were reviving. Until he had bought the paper, this hat of his, greasy, but well-brushed, was drawn over his brows, and he had walked with eyes bent upon the ground, moody and discouraged. Now he straightened himself up, and looked around cheerfully, and turned under the archway into Doctors Commons, feeling tolerably lighthearted for a man who had no prospect of a dinner, and who had no money and no credit. Once he indulged in a sardonic kind of laugh—it was when he recalled the

reporter's statement about the police and the clue.

'A good deal it will be worth to them,' said Finch, 'unless *I* happen to get hold of it. Then, perhaps, we might see something worth looking at. But Thomas Finch means to stand out of the business for the present,'—here he paused, and smiled no longer. A sudden thought had occurred to him. 'That letter I wrote to Colonel Pendleton, warning him of danger to the family! Is not that likely to be very awkward? Of course, I didn't know there was going to be a murder, but they might not look at it in that light. Phew!' Finch took out a pocket-handkerchief, and wiped his forehead, on which great beads of perspiration were standing, although the day was by no means hot. Presently he replaced his hat, and strode on again. 'What an infernal coward I am

getting!' said he, half-aloud; 'I can easily explain what *I* meant by the letter, if necessary, and the facts will bear me out, too. If the colonel puts inconvenient questions, I rather think that a few words whispered in his ear would be enough for him! I don't know that I have any particular reason to be afraid of him, or of any of his charming family party.'

Thus thinking, he whistled a lively tune, and nodded in a sprightly way to one of the ancient men with white aprons who still lurked disconsolately around Doctors Commons, and with whom Finch kept up a glass-of-ale acquaintance. He soon found himself at home, a full hour before his daughter expected him.

She saw at once that something unusual had happened. In former days she would have fancied that her father had obtained employment, and that this had

given him hope and courage. She had no such delusions now. He put his hat down on the chest-of-drawers, and eyed his daughter furtively. She had taken little notice of his return, and he speedily made up his mind that she was in what he called one of her 'fits.'

'We will rouse her out of it presently,' he thought; 'but give her time, give her time.' And, by way of giving her time, he pulled out his newspaper and began to read it. Presently the woman got up and, in a languid way, set about making tea.

Finch seemed to be greatly absorbed in what he read. Not until his daughter sat down to the table did he appear to know what was going on in the room. But, in fact, he had not been reading a line; he was ruminating upon certain grave problems to which the newspaper supplied no

solution, and he was trying to work them out for himself.

'You seem to be very much taken up with that paper,' said his daughter at length, for her curiosity was a little excited, in spite of herself. 'Is there anything so wonderfully interesting in it?'

'There is something intensely interesting, Emily, my girl,' replied Finch, briskly, and with great inward anxiety to get his daughter into a good humour with him as soon as possible.

'No doubt!—another Fenian explosion, I suppose. Take care that you do not get into trouble with these new friends of yours. That man Daly does not come here for *your* good, depend upon it. He is just using you as a tool. Thus far you have managed to keep out of prison, at any rate.'

There was a slight touch of sarcasm in

her voice which Finch, being desirous above all things of avoiding a conflict, thought it discreet not to resent.

'Yes,' said he, pleasantly, 'I have kept out of prison, and mean to do so as long as I can. Though, upon my word, it is not so easy when you have no money, and cannot help getting hungry twice a day or so. When a man's means dry up, his appetite ought to dry up too, but it doesn't—quite the contrary. An empty pocket is the best appetiser I know of—you feel as if you could eat a door-nail, and, unfortunately, you can't. The worst part of it is, we need not be poor but for your pride, Emily. Your husband would do the right thing by us if you would let him; he is willing to make proper provision for you, and you are fool enough to say no.'

'You mean he *was* willing when he had

the means. He has none now, as you are well aware. He is in debt.'

'We have heard that from Daly and others, but we don't know that it is true.'

'And then you forget that he *did* give money once, and you got hold of it and spent it. You never mention that.'

'Well, I did have a little money out of him it is true,' said Finch; but he took good care not to state how many times he had levied blackmail since the time referred to, unknown to his daughter. 'I lost it in trying to make more. It was for your sake I did it. You would have been a rich woman if I had succeeded. I do not expect gratitude, but you might spare me reproaches.' He spoke as if, in gambling away all his daughter's money, he had done her the greatest favour in the world. 'Is my misfortune,' he continued,

'any reason why we should starve now? Don't let us talk about the past!'

'Then why begin? I have told you a thousand times that there must be no more money wrung from *him*, even if he had it. What has set you off afresh on that old track?'

'Your language is harsh,' said Finch, with the look of a martyr, 'but it generally is to me now. I am old; that is why you are so considerate. Let that pass. What has put me on that track again, as you call it, is the news in the paper here—news of vast consequence to us, if we are sane enough to make a right use of it.'

'I understand what you mean. You see something upon which we may hang a threatening letter or two, like those I found on the floor here one night after you went out, one of them signed with *my* name, and in what looked very much like

my handwriting. I was the only person who could have told the difference—except you! Till then, I never knew that you could imitate a woman's handwriting as well as a man's. I wonder how many similar letters you have written since?'

'None,' replied Finch, emphatically, 'none—I give you my word.'

The woman laughed—a hard and bitter laugh.

'Well, it is all I have to give,' continued Finch, coolly; 'you may believe me this time! I thought you had forgotten all about that letter, but you never forget anything!'

One of the grievances which rankled most deeply in Finch's mind was, that other people would persist in remembering his black deeds. Why could they not erase them from memory as he did? Anything that was painful or disagreeable to

look back upon in his past life he wiped out—it was as if it had never taken place. Why in the world did not other people treat it in the same way?

'Go on with your wonderful news,' said the woman, listlessly. 'How does it concern us?'

'Listen, and judge for yourself. Mr. Roland Clavering, of Porthcawl Castle—you may have heard of him——'

'Well?' interrupted the woman, impatiently.

'He is dead!'

'Well?' she repeated; and then, after a slight pause, she added, 'What of it?'

'Upon my word, you are a cool hand, Emily! What of it? A good deal of it, I should say, even if there were nothing in the background. But there is. The old gentleman has been killed—stabbed, they say, no one knows by whom. It was

done in the night; the knife was left behind, but the man—if there was only one—got off, and the people in the house had no idea till the next day what had happened. What do you think of all that?'

He looked at his daughter searchingly, but her head was turned towards the fire, and he could not judge what impression his story had made upon her.

'Who was there at the time?' she asked, presently.

'I told you—or meant to. His wife was there, as a matter of course, and those two inevitable Americans, with Miss Pendleton, daughter of the soldierly-looking man you saw here. She is always at Porthcawl; I shouldn't wonder if the old man had left her some of his money. She may as well have it as anybody else, I suppose, so far as *you* are concerned.'

Finch said this in the hope of stirring

up his daughter, but she remained impassive.

'And my——' whatever she was going to say, she checked herself, or her thought took another direction. 'Sam Rafferty—was *he* there too?'

'Not that anybody knows of,' replied Finch, in a significant tone.

'What do you mean?' said the woman, looking hard at him.

'I mean that, if he *was* there, he did not choose to let himself be seen, and I should say that he was quite right! Master Sam has been acting very much in the dark for some time past. Has he written to you?'

'Why should he?' There was an angry gleam in the woman's eyes as she uttered these words.

'True, true!' said Finch, meekly. 'I ought not to have asked you. Sam has

his own way of doing things, and no one has seen more of his eccentricities than I have—than *we* have, as I may say. There's no harm in putting it that way, is there? Well, now,'—here his voice became low and earnest—'we may have to answer a few questions about Sam, whether we like it or not. There is sure to be talk about him, and it is known to some of his friends that there is some sort of connection between us here. Business, I always say—Sam and I are in a little spec together! But mind you this—if he was down at Porthcawl when this thing happened, he took good care not to say a word to me about it. No doubt he had his reasons for keeping quiet! Let me see, all this must have taken place the night before last, Tuesday. Why, he was here only the day before that!'

'But only for a few minutes.'

'Just so—he was in a hurry. He always is in a hurry now when he comes here. Business, you see, must be attended to; Sam thinks of that a good deal more than he did at one time. Perhaps he intends to keep up a good establishment even yet. I hope he does! I wonder whether he went down to Porthcawl the very day he left us?'

'What if he did?'

'Oh, nothing,' replied Finch, evidently determined to keep the peace at any price, 'of course he can go where he likes, so far as we are concerned. He has not taken me into his confidence much for some time past, although I am his friend and his——' a glance from his daughter here stopped him, and, after a slight hesitation, he added, 'his *partner* then, we will say, if you will not allow me to call him anything else.

Anyhow, the old squire is out of the game, that's clear enough.'

'And what of it?' said Mrs. Martin, with 'damnable iteration.'

''Pon my soul,' cried Finch, 'I don't understand you! How you keep on repeating that tune! What has it to do with us? Why, everything I should say. Doesn't it alter the whole prospect—change our positions altogether—yours, mine, everybody's?'

'I do not see how,' replied the daughter.

'You do not! But it *must*, all the same, and I am surprised you are blind to it. You used not to be so dull as this, Emily. What has come over you of late? But there, I need not ask,' he continued, with an affectation of feeling which did not deceive his daughter. 'You have been penned up in this dog-hole till all

your spirit has been taken out of you. You want a little change of air and scene —a little cheerfulness—something to look forward to!'

'Yes, that would be worth having,' said the woman, with a scornful emphasis, 'especially the last! But it would puzzle either of us to find *that* now. As for me, the only thing I have to look forward to is to get out of it all, the sooner the better!'

'Bah! You are low-spirited to-night! I admit there is reason—or there *has* been reason. You have not had a good time of it; that's a fact! We are at dead low-water now—I have pawned everything except the clothes I have on. And we owe something all round—not mentioning my score at the public-house,' he added to himself.

'That is our life,' said the woman, moodily, 'and yet you wonder that I am tired of it.'

'Now see here, Emily,' said Finch, getting up in his eagerness, and brandishing his newspaper with vehemence, 'unless you have completely lost the use of your senses, all this misery can be put an end to, at once and for ever. I don't deny you have cause of complaint against me; I am your father, and I ought to have done better by you. But we cannot gather up the spilt milk. I tell you that, if you act reasonably now, we may be put upon our feet again, and, what is more, we shall be kept on them for good. It is as clear as daylight.'

'And yet I do not see it,' persisted the woman, with a stolid air which exasperated Finch, although he tried hard to keep down his temper.

'Well, then, it must be because you *won't* see it. Listen to me! This old man's death—I'm sorry he was murdered, but he ought to have taken himself off voluntarily long ago—his death, I say, must make everybody better off; some people it will make rich. Mrs. Clavering will come into a good deal of money; you don't suppose the squire hasn't taken proper care of her? The land goes to the son; but the money—the *ready*—why, of course, the widow will get the lion's share. Very well, then—Sam will be rich too—as I say, everybody will be rich, and you propose to stand out of it!'

Finch was so much affected at the picture he had drawn that he seemed to be on the point of shedding tears. Not so his daughter.

'I *am* out of it,' she said, with the laugh which grated so harshly on Finch's ears,—

'I have not been "in it" for a long time past. It is not a question of what I like, but of what I have to submit to! We cannot alter that now.'

'But surely you can assert your rights?'

'Who says that I have any rights?' retorted the woman.

'I do, and *he* dare not deny them. What! Are you fool enough to pitch away the last hope of escape which either of us have, or can ever hope to have? Protect yourself—demand what is your due, and throw off all disguise. You ought to have done it long ago, in my opinion; but I can't see the least excuse for not doing it now.'

'I shall *not* do it—let that suffice!'

Finch looked for a moment as if he could have struck her, but, although she was well aware of his impulse, she seemed to have no fear.

'And you would actually let this chance slip by, like all the others,' said the father, after a pause, during which he had rolled the precious newspaper into a ball. 'You must be aware that such an opportunity cannot come again.'

'They cannot murder this poor old man a second time, if that is what you mean.'

'But surely you have some pride in yourself as a woman?'

'Not much.'

There was a mixture of bravado and sadness in her tone which might have gone to the heart of any father but Thomas Finch.

'Do you mean to say,' he urged, 'that you would not rather take your place as a wife than be living here in this cut-throat manner?'

'I don't know that I should,' said she,

with kindling animation. 'You are a little late in the day with all this melodramatic talk, father. You deliberately misled me —and *him;* and then you plundered him, till I stopped you, and would have plundered him again, only I interfered again. Ah—get angry and clench your fist! You cannot make me afraid of anything you can do now. Why, what can you do—kill me? If you think I am afraid of *that,* try it! I am not so easily killed, I think, or I should have been dead long ago. You robbed the raw youth after you had married him to me, and since then you have pretended you had "business" with him, and under that cloak I dare say you have managed to secure your usual plunder. It is always the same worn-out plea of "business." Now you want me to go after him, to help you to fill your pockets at his expense. Have I not told you that

I never would touch a farthing of his money again? If I find out that you have done so—that you have even taken the value of that newspaper from him—I will carry out my threat, and get for ever beyond your reach, even if I have to go out of the world to do it! I tell you plainly, and you had better heed my words well—if you succeed in victimising him again, it shall not be under cover of my name, and you shall rue the day!'

Her breath came and went painfully, as if she was exhausted; then she lay back in her chair, pale and weary, evidently in suffering. Finch looked at her intently, for he was afraid she was seriously ill; but there was no sympathy, still less any remorse, in his look or manner. According to his view, he was being baffled by sheer stupid, reckless, feminine obstinacy, but he had no intention of giving up the game.

He re-opened his newspaper, and smoothed it out, and read aloud the account of the murder. His daughter listened—more intently than Finch was aware. When he had come to the end, he allowed a few minutes to pass in silence, and then he shot a quick glance at his daughter, and gathered himself up for the last and decisive stage in the contest.

'If you are so ready to make sacrifices,' he said, 'there is likely to be another chance for you shortly. Your husband has been troubled so little with you that we cannot wonder at his treating you as if you were out of the way altogether. They say he is going to be married again.'

'Who says so?'

The woman spoke with a sudden sharpness which promised well for Finch's final move.

'I have heard it a dozen times,' replied

Finch, now feeling his way, step by step. 'I didn't want to vex you by mentioning it. I knew that at any time you could put a stop to *that*, but, as you now seem to have made up your mind to let everything go by the board, I naturally thought you wouldn't care how many times your husband chose to get married again. What has it to do with you? You want him to have his liberty, and he has been so very much ill-used, poor fellow, that the least we can do is to let him please himself!'

'This, I suppose, is a simple invention,' said the woman, quietly; but Finch knew her well enough to perceive that the storm was beating up rapidly.

'It is the simple truth! This time he has made up his mind to marry a lady, so one of his friends says.'

'*Who* says so?' repeated the daughter.

'Daly, if you must know. He had it

from Mr. Rufus Snapper, who is more in your husband's confidence than we are.'

'I do not believe it,' said the woman.

'It is true,' replied Finch, with not a whit the less earnestness because every word of it was false. He had heard no such statement from Daly or from anybody else.

'I do not believe he is base enough to do it. Even if he had no thought of me, he would consider *her*—this "lady," as you say. Who is she?'

'What does it matter? If he gets married again, it might as well be to one as to another. Nobody outside this room knows that his first wife is alive, unless *he* has told his friends, and that is not very likely. He has kept his secret well, and we have kept it for him. Of course, he is going to run a risk now, but while he can shut your mouth, and you can shut *mine*,

he is safe enough. I only wonder he hasn't done it before.'

'You mistake—the world is not made up of villains.'

'There's a good sprinkling of them in it,' replied Finch, nothing abashed. 'Never mind all that! When a man is really in love, he will do a great deal to get rid of such encumbrances as we are; and your husband is in love this time, and no mistake about it.' His daughter's cheeks were now flushed, and her hands twitched nervously. Finch hailed these signs with delight. 'So he will have it all his own way. I really do not see, since we are so very obliging, why we should not go to the wedding! We cannot come out strong in the diamond-bracelet line, but we might send an old shoe after the bride. I have a couple of old shoes entirely at her service;' and Finch looked down, and saw glimpses

of his stockings through cracks in his boots, although he had carefully blacked them over that very morning.

'You need not alarm yourself,' said the daughter, rising from her chair, and walking hurriedly to and fro. 'There will be no wedding.'

'Indeed!' said Finch, sarcastically. 'And, pray, who will prevent it?'

'*I will!*' replied the woman, standing over her father, who cowered down beneath her fierce gestures and flashing eyes. 'You have goaded me on, and now, if you are deceiving me, beware of the consequences! It will be for the last time. If you speak the truth, it will be for *him* to beware. We shall see who has most reason to fear when all is over. Now you had better go out—I want to be alone. There is room for you at the public-house, I have no doubt.'

'By Jove, I have won the day!' cried Finch, exultingly, as he cleared the court almost at a bound. 'Let everybody look out; I have roused the tigress at last!'

CHAPTER VII.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

Day after day went by, and Mrs. Martin made no further sign. Finch was in despair. He had found it hard work, as he frequently said to himself, to 'wind her up,' and now, at the most important crisis of her life, she had wilfully run down again. For all that Finch could see, she had dismissed their recent conversation entirely from her mind. But this was not the case. Mrs. Martin had made up her mind to take a decisive step, but her nature had

always been indolent, and of late years it had become apathetic. She kept on putting off a measure which would necessarily involve some trouble and inconvenience. Her father tried more than once to renew the discussion of the subject, but she scarcely answered his remarks, and made none of her own. Finch saw that there was nothing for him but to wait, and he preferred waiting at the public-house, where his confident assurances about the large fortune which his daughter was soon coming into had gained him a partial renewal of his credit.

In the meantime, Mr. Rufus Snapper was by no means idle. Ten days or so after the murder he had gone on one of his secret expeditions to Birmingham, and had lost not a moment in inviting his friends, Daly and Rafferty, to dine with him at the Queen's Hotel. Daly had at

first been rather shy of accepting the invitation, but, when Snapper told him who was to make the third in the party, he changed his tone.

'So Rafferty has promised you, has he? To tell you the truth, I rather want to meet that gentleman—he has been keeping carefully out of my way of late. I cannot make out what he has been up to.'

'But I can,' thought Snapper, although he had no intention of communicating his suspicions to Patrick Daly.

He had found Sam Rafferty with some difficulty, and fancied that he had a nervous sort of look when they first met. That soon passed away, and in a few minutes he was as much at home as ever with his Philadelphian friend. He had, in a fidgety way, asked a question or two about the murder at Porthcawl, but Snapper gently put him off.

'Wait till this evening,' said he, 'and we will talk it over quietly.'

He did not mention that Daly was to be present.

It did not escape Snapper's atttention in the evening that the Irishman and Rafferty shook hands with some constraint. Had there been a quarrel? and, if so, what about? Snapper watched carefully for some light on these questions, but could find little or none. Even when he touched, carefully and cleverly, on the subject of the murder, Rafferty made scarcely any response. Daly, on the other hand, seemed to be very curious, and asked many questions.

'Took place at night, didn't it?' said he. 'Not a soul heard a sound, so the papers say, though that seems very strange.'

'Well, that is not quite correct,' replied Snapper, 'for Colonel Pendleton heard a

cry of some kind, and so did his daughter, but the night was stormy and they fancied they were mistaken. There was no stranger in the house, and nothing had been disturbed. The colonel got up when the cry reached his ears and went downstairs —the murderer may have heard him and fled before he had time to rob. That is really all we know.'

'It isn't much,' said Daly; 'I mean, not much for the police to work upon. But I thought the papers spoke of a knife having been found?'

'So there was, but the hard thing is to discover an owner for it. At present no one comes forward to claim it.'

'Have the police got it still?' asked Rafferty, speaking for the first time.

'Of course,' said Snapper; 'but they would be very glad to part with it, you understand, if the owner would come for-

ward to claim it. Even the London detectives have not been able to track *him*. My belief is,' he added, with a side-long glance at Rafferty, 'that the guilty man will get off altogether.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' replied Rafferty, carelessly.

'As no strangers were seen about the place,' suggested Daly, 'might not the murder have been committed by some one in the house?'

'Why, what do you mean?'

It was Rafferty who spoke, and his tone was somewhat excited.

'I mean that one of the servants may have done it—why not? Such things have been heard of before.'

'Yes, but there is no ground for any such suspicion in this case,' answered Snapper, briefly, as if desirous of not pursuing the topic further.

After all, the person who had taken the greatest interest in it was Daly. Rafferty seemed to have his thoughts elsewhere. Observing this, Snapper determined to bring him back.

'You have heard,' said he, 'that your mother, Mrs. Clavering, has gone from the Castle?'

This time Rafferty was not indifferent to his friend's news. He looked up in undisguised astonishment.

'Gone!' he repeated. 'Why, how can that be? I had a letter from her the other day, and she mentioned no such intention. Are you sure?'

'Quite sure. She went the day after the funeral, and I rather think that you will find she is in Paris.'

This had been one of Mr. Snapper's premeditated *coups*, and he was not disap-

pointed in its effects. Rafferty and Daly exchanged a look which spoke as plainly as words could do of disappointment and disgust.

'Well,' said Rafferty, after draining his glass quickly, 'hang me, if this doesn't beat anything I have heard of yet! What could have made her leave the place in such a hurry without even sending for me? The will, too—what was it you said about that?'

'Nothing,' said Snapper, drily.

'No? I thought you did. There must have been a will of some kind—I should have supposed she might have told me the contents of that, at any rate. Perhaps she forgets I am one of the family!'

'It is not that,' replied Snapper, always keenly studying his friend's manner and words, 'for she spoke to me about you just before her departure.'

'And what did she say?' asked Rafferty, evidently much irritated.

'Nothing very much—I will tell you another time. She was a good deal worried, and I don't doubt that she will write to you as soon as she can. It is not only the loss of her husband, but the mystery of it that vexes her.'

'Yes,' said her son, 'I should think she could put up with the loss easily enough, if that were all.'

A frown came upon Snapper's brow, and when he next spoke his voice was hard and cold.

'I thought you knew all about the will,' he said. 'She is sure to tell you about that. That was the principal cause of her agitation when she went away.'

'How was that?' Rafferty asked, breathlessly, and the Philadelphian noticed that Daly seemed to be equally on the alert.

'Mrs. Clavering was, of course, a good deal concerned in the will,' went on Snapper, with a slowness which seemed intolerable to the listeners,—'and you are her only son. She is still young, however, and may very well marry again. In that case, she is not too well provided for.'

'Do you mean to say she will not be rich?'

Rafferty was controlling his impatience with no slight difficulty.

'It all depends upon what you call rich,' replied Snapper, in a musing way. 'I have known people consider a thousand or two a-year riches. That, I suppose, would not be your view. Now I do not call a woman like your mother well provided for with only a few thousand pounds, to be paid over in one sum, and there an end of it; and that is all she gets under the squire's will. Paris is not a cheap

place, and I have heard that Mrs. Clavering has taken a suite of rooms at one of the hotels. She has old friends there, and always lived in good style—as perhaps you know better than I do.'

'Do you mean to say there is not an annuity—a large one?' asked Rafferty, now almost as white as the table-cloth.

'None at all, my dear fellow, large or small. The Porthcawl estate goes, as a matter of course, to the son; and as for the personalty, with the exception of the legacy to your mother, it is divided between the young squire and Miss Pendleton.'

'What! The daughter of that Confederate fire-eater?' broke in Daly, with increasing disgust.

'Of my intimate and valued friend, Colonel Pendleton,' replied Snapper, gravely, and bowing slightly over the table.

'No young lady ever deserved her good fortune better. Not that she particularly needed it; she would have been rich enough some day without that money.'

'And my mother got scarcely anything,' said Rafferty, leaning back in his chair, with his hands plunged deep in his pockets —for he had ceased to pay any attention to the dinner.

'She will have enough to live upon, but not enough—to speak candidly—to enable her to do anything for you, Sam. I am very sorry about it; naturally I thought you had heard the news, or I would not have brought it out so suddenly here. It seems to have quite spoiled your appetite.'

'Enough to spoil it, I should think,' said Sam, with a half-stifled oath. 'Who in thunder could have expected such a thing as this? Perhaps, after all,' he con-

tinued, with a sudden burst of hope, 'you may be mistaken. You did not hear the will read, and therefore you cannot say positively what was in it?'

'There is the account from the newspapers—read for yourself,'—and Snapper handed him over a little slip, which Rafferty began to peruse with the greatest eagerness.

When he had finished, he passed it on to Daly, who glanced hastily over it and thrust it into his waistcoat pocket.

'I am sorry you are so disappointed,' said Snapper, who had duly marked the impression his news had produced. 'It looks bad for you, your mother not writing. I have heard—mind you, I don't know the truth of it—that this was an old will, and that the squire drew up another some time ago much more in your mother's favour. Unluckily for her and for you, he

did not sign it. The lawyer received a note from him the very day of the murder, asking him to call on the morrow, and bring the new will with him. No doubt, Mr. Clavering intended then to sign it, but, as you see, he was prevented.'

'Prevented! How?' asked Rafferty, whose faculties seemed to be getting a little clouded.

'How?' repeated Snapper, half thinking that Rafferty's denseness must be assumed. 'Why, by the murder—surely you must see that. The squire had no time to carry out his intentions. Had he lived even a day longer, it might have made all the difference in the world to your mother—and therefore, I presume, to you.'

'So that if it had not been for the murder——' began Rafferty, half bewildered.

'If it had not been for that, Mrs. Claver-

ing would have got half her husband's fortune—so says the lawyer who drew up the will—and I suppose you would not have been disappointed. Mrs. Clavering believed that the new will was signed long ago, but something or other always interfered to cause delay.'

Mr. Snapper did not explain, as he might have done, that it was Rafferty's first visit to Porthcawl, on the occasion of his memorable interview with the squire, which originally caused Roland Clavering to throw the new will aside into a drawer, unsigned. The chapter of accidents did the rest.

'You look quite taken aback,' said the Philadelphian to Rafferty, putting on a pleasant air. 'Why, man, you are only beginning life, and have plenty of time to get over this disappointment. You may find it a little awkward, perhaps, at first,

as you seem to have counted on coming in for a good thing.'

'Of course I counted upon it,' replied Rafferty, coarsely, 'what else did she marry him for?'

'And it has not turned out quite as you expected,' remarked Snapper, with a gleam in his eyes which escaped Rafferty's observation. 'Still, you must remember the circumstances—it is the man who murdered the squire who has done you this bad turn.'

'*That's* clear enough, any way,' said Daly, looking Rafferty very hard in the face.

'Everything goes wrong with me now,' said Sam, utterly cast down. 'I am in for a regular run of bad luck. My mother always promised that, as soon as she came into her property, she would pay my debts, and give me a new start in the world. I

have been depending on that ever so long—borrowing money on the strength of it, as I had a fair right to do. The old squire could not have lived much longer——'

'That is one reason why it was such a mistake to kill him,' suggested Snapper.

'Well, one of the servants did it,' said Rafferty, energetically, 'there can be no doubt about that. Robbery was the object, and the man was disturbed. No stranger could have got away from such a place so easily. He must have been seen, either in coming or going. But anybody already in the house could have got back to his room without discovery.'

'Yes, that is all very true,' remarked Snapper, apparently rather impressed with Rafferty's argument.

'And they will never find the murderer unless they look inside the house for him,

—unless they have been fools enough to let him bolt already.'

'I shouldn't wonder if Sam turned out to be right,' said Daly. 'As I said before, it must have been done by some one who knew his way about the place.'

'No one doubts that,' replied Snapper, and then he turned to Rafferty. 'Have you heard what the family mean to do? They are determined to unravel the crime, if they can, and they will begin by offering a large sum as a reward for the discovery of the murderer. They say it is to be as much as five thousand pounds.'

'The deuce!' exclaimed Sam. 'That amount would more than pull me through.'

'Then why don't you try for it?' said Daly, in a peculiar tone.

'I am afraid he is not likely to get it,' interposed Snapper, 'detective work is not much in his line. But there is no doubt

that eventually we shall put our hands on the right man. What—going so soon?' for Rafferty had risen from the table; 'no coffee, no cigar, no anything?'

'I am obliged to go—I have an engagement,' replied Sam, who was evidently not yet able to reconcile himself to his disappointment. 'I meant to have told you when I first came in, but forgot it.'

'Well, if it must be so, we cannot help it. But you will stop and smoke a cigar with me, Mr. Daly? It is quite early—not ten—and I never go to bed till eleven, and not then, if I have any reasonable excuse for sitting up longer.'

'I am going to walk home with our friend here,' replied Daly, with a significant shrug. 'He is low-spirited, and I must try to cheer him up a little. Besides, we have a good many things to talk over.

Come along, Sam—sorry to leave you, Mr. Snapper, but business is business.'

Rafferty looked as if he could have willingly dispensed with the company of his friend, but he saw that Daly would not be shaken off. Snapper went with them both into the passage, then returned, lit a cigar, and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

'Business is business, is it?' he said to himself. 'And what sort of business is going on between you, I wonder? Daly has lent Rafferty a lot of money from time to time—he must have had a reason for that, for I never knew an Irish American worth a cent as a *lender* before. He felt pretty confident he was in for a sure thing. Sam has been too much for him, simple as he looks—but what will he do *now?* How pay Daly and—and—get rid of his other

difficulties? Will he make a run for it? I think not; and, if he does, I shall know where to find him when I want him. Just for the present, I may safely leave Daly to watch him, while I go and attend to this miserable affair of Geoffrey Clavering's.'

He drew a letter from his pocket, sighed once or twice as he read it, and remained plunged in meditation long after his visitors had left him.

Daly kept close by Rafferty's side as they walked through the streets. They went some little distance without a word being exchanged between them, and at last it was the Irishman who broke the silence.

'This is a very bad business,' said he, in a low voice.

'It needs no conjuror to tell us that,' replied Rafferty, with a sickly laugh.

'What are you going to do about it?' asked Daly.

'Do? what can I do? I can't bring the old man to life again, I suppose, and make him sign that will? You will have to wait for your money, that's all.'

'What else *have* I been doing for months past? How much longer am I to wait, that's the point?'

'I can't tell you,' said Rafferty, in a dogged tone. 'You see how I stand—not much to be expected from my mother now, and I've no one else to look to.'

'Try Finch,' suggested Daly, apparently in earnest.

'Why, Finch is always trying *me* for something or other. We have had dealings together, but there's no longer any money in them. He'll bring himself to grief some of these days with his for-

geries, and I don't mean to be caught in the net.'

'No, you have enough to attend to without that,' said Daly, significantly.

'What do you mean?'

'Why, there's my money, for instance. You *must* find it, you know, for I mean to have it.'

Rafferty was evidently cowed by the tone which Daly had assumed. It was, in truth, with no slight sense of relief that he found himself at his own door.

'I will get it somehow or other,' he said, 'within a month.'

'You had better,' replied Daly, in the same menacing manner. 'I don't want to be ugly with you, but, if I am not paid in a month from to-day, I will *tell all I know* —you understand?'

'You would not do that?'

Rafferty spoke with a nervousness which he tried in vain to conceal.

'Indeed I would, so don't deceive yourself. You have fooled me long enough, and now you have come to the end of your rope, so far as I am concerned. When the old man at Porthcawl died, I was to be paid.'

'Could I help it?'

'It's all the same to me—you deceived me. Now I mean to get my money on this day four weeks, or you will have to take the consequences!'

'I must find it, that's all,' said Sam, in a conciliating tone.

'Do—it may save you from something worse than having to raise the wind.'

He turned away without saying good-night, and Sam went to his room, heavy at heart.

'Why did I ever trust him!' he moaned, as he lay tossing upon his bed. 'I might have known he would betray me whenever it suited his purpose. I must have been drunk when I let it out, and I daresay he made me drunk so as to have me at his mercy. What an idiot I have been! Once let me wriggle out of this mess, and I'll manage to get even with Daly, and then we'll see who is master of the situation!'

But at present he did not see how the process of wriggling out was to be managed.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. FINCH'S ULTIMATUM.

THE business which Mr. Snapper had taken in hand for Geoffrey Clavering was by no means of a pleasant kind. It obliged him to see Thomas Finch, and when he had done that—much against his will—the worst was not over. Finch had insisted upon an interview with Clavering himself, and, after some deliberation, Rufus Snapper assented to this, provided that the meeting took place in his presence.

'He will not see you again except upon

my persuasion,' said Snapper, 'and it will be better for me to be there. I will not consent to his paying you another shilling.'

'Perhaps you had better wait till you have heard what I have got to say before announcing your final conclusion,' replied Finch, coolly.

'Well, there will be one or two things for you to explain—among them that letter of yours to Colonel Pendleton.'

'Which letter?'

'I did not know you had written many. I mean the one warning him of some disaster or misfortune hanging over the Clavering family.'

'That can easily be explained at any time—now, if you like. I meant no more than I daresay you have been able to guess.'

'Then you referred to the squire's son—not to the squire?'

'Exactly; the letter will show that.'

'There is nothing in the letter to show it.'

'There would be with a very few words of explanation added.'

Finch said this in a very significant tone, and probably the Philadelphian understood him, for he said no more. He had felt sure from the first that the letter had no other meaning than that which Finch assigned to it.

A few days afterwards, Geoffrey Clavering received a note from Snapper, and in response to a few words in it he lost no time in presenting himself at his friend's hotel. Snapper received him with even more than ordinary cordiality.

'My dear Geoffrey,' he cried, 'I am delighted to see you. I was half inclined to think you would not come.'

'Why should I not?'

'Because it is so disagreeable a business, and the temptation must be so strong to run away from it altogether. However, here you are, and you have done the wisest thing in coming. Now let us hope for the best.'

'What time do you expect him?'

'Expect him? Why, my dear boy, he was here an hour ago. He scents his prey afar off at such times as these, and makes up his mind to run no risks of losing it. I daresay he watched for you outside the hotel all the morning.'

Clavering sat down, and the disgust which he felt in his heart was visible enough, to Snapper's eyes, upon his face.

'You must go through with it now,' said the Philadelphian, kindly; 'we can generally do a thing, however unpleasant it may be, when there is no help for it. That is our position now.'

'I do not see how it is possible that any good can come of this scene,' remarked the younger man. 'The scoundrel is only preparing another trap for us.'

'I think not—at any rate, I would not take the responsibility of refusing to hear what he has to say.'

'There is no one with him?'

The two men exchanged a meaning look, and Snapper shrugged his shoulders.

'He is alone,' said he; 'that's of course. At first he talked of bringing—that other person—but I would not hear of it. Now, let us send for him and have it over.'

He rang the bell as he spoke, and made a sign to the waiter. In the course of a few minutes the door opened again and Thomas Finch entered the room, with the easy, confident manner which distinguished him, especially in moments of difficulty.

'Good-day, Mr. Snapper,' he said, in a

cheerful tone; 'hope you are well, Geoffrey. It is a long time since I have seen *you*—never since that night at the Albany. I have called very often, but you were never at home—a strange coincidence. I need not tell you how sorry I was to hear of your poor father's death—doubly sad, under the circumstances.' He passed his handkerchief round his hat, intending, perhaps, to call attention to the narrow band of crape round it. 'I respected your father,' he said, 'as everybody else did. Your loss is a heavy one.'

Clavering seemed to be controlling himself with difficulty. He made an impatient movement, and Snapper understood what was going on.

'Recollect,' said he to Finch, 'you have asked for this interview on business. I think it would be better if you confined yourself strictly to that.'

'That need not prevent us exchanging the courtesies which are usual among gentlemen,' replied Finch, drawing himself up. 'I knew Geoffrey Clavering some years before you did, I think, Mr. Snapper?'

'So much the worse for him!'

'He did not always think so. Perhaps he might not think so now if interlopers had not stepped in between us. I know that a change has come over him lately, or I should not have been turned away so often from his door. By-the-way, Geoffrey, the last time I was there I met a friend of yours just going or just coming, I really do not know which. That American colonel—what's his name?—you must remember him.'

'Colonel Pendleton?' said Clavering, with great irritation.

He remembered the interview with Finch and his daughter which the colonel

had described, but the conviction passed through his mind that this had not been the end of Finch's exploits.

'The very same. A tall, soldierly man. You might know him among a thousand.'

'Did he see you at my door?'

'No, no,' replied Finch, shaking his head. 'I am a little too much a man of the world for that. I passed him quickly, and took good care to go out at the other end of the passage. He looked after me a long time, however; I fancy he recognised me.'

'Then he had seen you before?'

'Yes—that is——' Finch hesitated, and seemed confused. But in a moment he recovered himself, and went on in the same half-defiant strain. 'Seen me? Well, very likely—what would there be so very wonderful in that? I live in a garret now, it is true, but that does not put me quite

beyond the pale of society. Very often I have visitors; I am happy to say that all my friends do not treat me as you have done. Colonel Pendleton has been to see me, and I will not deny that I rather like him. I like all Americans; so does everybody else just now; they are in season, as one may say. The colonel deserves to be always in season, and they say his daughter is worthy of her sire.'

All this he said in a jaunty way, and his pleasure in saying it was not diminished by observing that his auditors were getting into a fever.

'You are a most consummate villain,' said Clavering, in a low, hoarse voice. 'Have you dared——'

'Do not call me names, Geoffrey,' replied Finch, quite unmoved. He put his hat down on the table, and rubbed his hands together in evident enjoyment.

'Situated as we are,' he went on, 'it really is unbecoming in either of us to attempt to exasperate the other. I do not mind being called a villain once in a way—it varies the monotony of life. But you are making rather a custom of it—don't you think so? —and that is pushing playfulness a little too far. Still, I let it pass,'—and here he waved it from him, with a genial smile—'pass like a summer's cloud, or a lover's dream, or anything else of that airy nature that you prefer.'

He laid a little more stress upon the 'lover's dream' than upon the other figure, and, in spite of his apparent gaiety, he was watching Clavering with a furtive and sinister expression which did not escape the notice of Rufus Snapper.

'When you have quite done with all this nonsense,' said the Philadelphian,

curtly, 'we will come to the matter which brings you here.'

'The sooner the better—only it is a poor preliminary to business to call a man a villain.'

'Not under the circumstances,' said Snapper, fixing his eye upon Finch.

'You take the same view, do you, Mr. Snapper? Some day you will understand me better. One thing only I will say: it does seem very hard that our friend—I suppose I may still call him so?—should persist in avoiding me as he does, and disowning an old friendship. Do you call that right?'

'I only wish he had done it long ago,' replied Snapper.

'But, as he didn't, why begin just now? I have been a good friend to him, although he forgets all about *that*. When

he was preparing for the University, who helped him as I did, in all sorts of ways? And, as for the event which is the cause of our being here now, it is entirely his own fault that it did not turn out well. Had he been reasonable, or taken the right view of the matter, we might all have been happy enough to-day. But he has determined to make himself miserable.'

'Enough of this,' broke in Clavering, 'come to your business. What piece of knavery have you been concocting now?'

'Listen,' said Finch, turning to the Philadelphian with an injured air, 'to his way of putting things. Pleasant, isn't it? However, I will take it quietly for the sake of old times, and pass that over too. Let us come to business, as you say. It is no use beating about the bush. What I want now is a regular provision for myself

and—my belongings. I am getting old, and the system of living from hand to mouth doesn't suit me as well as it did. Then what do I propose? I will tell you in two words: an annuity. It prolongs life, promotes digestion, and assists sleep. So much a year, paid quarterly; that, I think, is about the ticket.' He paused for a moment, but as no one seemed inclined to break the silence he began again. 'Do you suppose,' said he, 'that it is very agreeable to go, hat in hand, to a man like Geoffrey Clavering, especially when he keeps you hanging about, refusing to see you, for weeks together? And then, what do I get, after all my trouble? Perhaps a sovereign, perhaps a fiver; not enough to keep body and soul together. Am I to starve?'

He crossed his arms upon his breast, and stood looking at Rufus Snapper.

'Since you ask me,' said the Philadelphian, 'I should say yes.'

'But I have some choice in the matter,' rejoined Finch, 'and I say no—emphatically no. I prefer the annuity.'

'Have you ever seen these before?' interposed Clavering, handing over to Finch a handful of cheques.

When he first caught sight of these cheques, Finch was evidently disconcerted. His eyes were lowered for the first time, and his hand shook a little. But he had wonderful command over himself, and when he turned to Clavering it was with his usual half-insolent composure.

'What is the meaning of this?' asked Rufus Snapper, approaching the table. 'These cheques are signed by you, Geoffrey, and have all been cashed.'

'Just so,' said Finch, pleasantly; 'you see everything at a glance. Originally,

they belonged to our esteemed friend here —technically, perhaps, they belong to him still. But they happened to come into my possession, and it seemed a pity not to make use of them. I will tell you about it, if you like.'

Snapper looked at Clavering, but the young squire seemed to be listening to Finch, and the adventurer saw this, and continued his story.

'The night of my last visit to the Albany—some little time ago—I had to wait an hour or two for the return of our dear friend. What was I to do? There were some books lying about, but I never read—no wise man does. After what I have seen of life, what can books teach me?'

'Come to the point,' interrupted Snapper, rather roughly—'what have you to say to these cheques?'

'I am coming to the point,' said Finch, quite at his ease, 'only you must let me get at it my own way. Pray give me time. Well, as I was saying, I waited pretty patiently, but when you have nothing but your own thoughts to keep you company, it is anything but pleasant work to kick your heels about in somebody else's room. I foraged about, and at last, in a drawer—for I naturally opened all the drawers when I found nothing amusing on the table—I saw a cheque-book.

'Gentlemen,' continued Finch, stimulated by the sound of his own voice, and resting one hand upon the table as if he were addressing a meeting, 'the sight of a cheque-book always interests and touches me. It is a link with the past. It recalls the happy days of youth when I had such a book of my own; it reminds me of departed pleasures as well as of old friends.

I seemed to see many a good dinner before me as I turned over the leaves of Geoffrey's cheque-book. I thought of all the things I would do if the book were mine, with something substantial behind it—the little run over to France, a dinner at Bignon's with a sympathetic companion, perhaps a turn through Switzerland later in the year. Thus meditating, I almost unconsciously pulled out a dozen of these oblong slips of paper, counterparts and all, and put the book back into the drawer, and the blank cheques into my pocket. I felt that I was a gentleman once more.'

'The sort of gentleman that we string up to the nearest tree out West,' said Rufus Snapper.

'Perhaps so, but we are not out West now, so what has that to do with it? Now we come to the next day; I should have been there before if you had not inter-

rupted me. I began filling up one or two of these cheques, by way of practice—spoiled the first by my experiments, succeeded so well with the second that it might have deceived you or Clavering himself—a more creditable piece of work I never saw. I had plenty of our young friend's letters by me to serve as models, and nature has endowed me with a genuine talent for imitating the handwriting of other people. Look at this, for instance,' —he held out one of the cheques to Snapper, who examined it curiously. 'I think you will acknowledge that the original is sometimes not so well done as the imitation. In other words, I write the Clavering hand better than the family.'

A furious storm was raging within Rufus Snapper, but outwardly he was moderately calm.

He turned to Clavering and said,

'What are you going to do with this ruffian?'

'I shall prosecute him for forgery.'

'Do so,' said Finch, calmly. 'I shall be as well off then as I am now. I have never asked for any consideration from you—I expect none now. Pray do as you like without regard to me.'

He leaned back in the chair, and smiled graciously at the persons who stood watching him.

Presently Rufus Snapper moved over to the side of Clavering, and led him to the window, where they conversed in an undertone for a few minutes. The only words which Finch could overhear occurred at the end of the conversation, and they were uttered by Clavering:

'I suppose it had better be so, only make an end of it.'

'How many of these cheques have you

forged?' Snapper walked close to the man as he put this question, and looked him hard in the face.

'Eleven, and one spoilt, as I told you. You need not look so suspicious—I will tell you everything. I have nothing to conceal, because I fear nothing.'

'If it were my own case, I would hand you over to a policeman within five minutes——'

'Exactly; but, as our young friend there is concerned in it, you will not.'

Decidedly Finch was the most unruffled person in the room.

'Was anybody else with you in this robbery?' said Rufus Snapper, after a slight pause.

'Ah,' replied Finch, shaking his head in a knowing manner, 'now you ask me a question which I am scarcely at liberty to answer. I have a right to get myself into

trouble, but not to betray a friend. However, I will tell you this much: I *had* a little help in getting the cheques negotiated. A friend of mine invariably got the money, and kept half for his trouble. He is well-connected, by his mother's marriage, at any rate; I fancy even you would not deny that,' he added, with a grin, addressing himself to Clavering.

'Sam Rafferty was the man, then,' said Snapper, with a shrewd look, 'I thought as much! Now, if you would only clear up the other half of the mystery about him, I really think we might do something for you even now.'

'I don't know what you mean,' replied Finch, a little confused in spite of himself.

'I will soon explain. Who is his wife?'

'I don't know,' said Finch, doggedly.

'You do know, but you refuse to tell?'

'Have it as you please. That is not the business that brings us here to-day, I suppose? Let us get that over first.'

There was another pause, during which Rufus Snapper took up the cheques which the man had laid upon the table. He did this by a rapid movement, as if afraid that Finch would seek to retain them; but that worthy merely picked up one which had fallen on the floor, and handed it over with a low bow. 'Take them all,' said he; 'they are no longer of any use to me.'

'Now listen, Thomas Finch,' began Mr. Snapper.

'Very odd,' interrupted the forger, 'but this is the first time that either of you have called me by my right name since I entered the house. Scoundrel, villain, and other terms of endearment, but never till now, Thomas Finch.'

'Suppose,' continued Snapper, 'Mr.

Clavering burns these cheques, and puts up with the loss. Suppose, moreover, that he pays you annually the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds, on condition that you go to Australia—the money to be paid through a banker there. Will you take yourself off at once and for ever, and choose somebody else's name to forge?'

'Gentlemen,' replied Finch, clearing his throat, and ranging himself in front of the table again, 'you do not know *me*, and you little understand the springs of human nature. We are all creatures of habit or impulse, and I am peculiarly so—a sensitive plant. Uproot such a plant, and what happens? Gentlemen, it dies.'

'Just so,' said Snapper, with emphatic approval.

'It dies,' resumed Finch, in a sentimental tone, 'and so it would be with me were I torn from this soil—to your lasting regret.'

'Do not let that thought influence you,' remarked Snapper.

'I am, gentlemen,' continued Finch, 'a lover of my country; English to the backbone. All foreigners—and what are colonists but foreigners?—set my teeth on edge. Remove me from England, and I should wither. Now, I have no desire to wither—I prefer to flourish here on Geoffrey's annuity. Transportation is a penalty of the past, like the pillory.'

'But penal servitude is not,' interposed the Philadelphian.

Finch snapped his fingers with a lofty air.

'So much for penal servitude,' said he. 'We need not waste our time in talking nonsense. You will not send me to prison, and you cannot transport me. England has treated me rather badly, but I forgive her. I have tried to do her credit in my

humble way. She and I will never part.'

'Then you would decline this offer?'

'Promptly. I like London better than Melbourne. Besides, I have a daughter; I do not wish to hurt anybody's feelings by laying too much stress upon the fact, but there is such a person in the world, and she might wish to be consulted. You propose that we two should live on five pounds a week?'

'A separate provision would be made for her, and placed beyond your reach.'

'How very thoughtful of you!' Finch laid his hand upon his heart, and bowed once more. 'So you would sow dissension between father and child—you would take her from the shelter of my roof, and tempt her to seek another home!'

'It is a pity she did not find one long ago,' remarked Snapper.

'Whose fault is it that she did not?' retorted Finch, quickly.

'Not yours,' said the American, looking keenly at the forger, 'for if I am not much mistaken you have tried to provide her with more than one home.'

Finch's eyes fell, and he stammered a little before he managed to reply.

'My daughter and I intend to be inseparable,' he said, but not quite with his habitual assurance. 'She will not leave me—I will not leave her.'

'Does she know on what errand you have come here now?'

'Never mind that,' said Finch, rudely, once more thrown off his guard.

'I do mind it,' remarked Rufus Snapper, becoming more cool as he noticed the other's discomfiture. 'I believe she has never been a party to your blackmailing and forging, and, if you dare to come

straight to her now, I will convict you of deceiving her—just as you have robbed *him*.'

Finch was not a little disquieted. He half feared that Rufus Snapper would act upon the hint he had thrown out, and go at once to the daughter, and tell her all. That was a complication for which he was totally unprepared.

'My daughter,' said he, endeavouring to steady his voice, 'puts confidence in her father. She would not take your word against his.'

'We shall see.'

Finch gathered from the tone in which Snapper spoke that he fully intended putting the question to the test. This exasperated him.

'See and welcome,' said he, in a loud voice. 'At present, however, you have to do with me. I refuse your ridiculous

offer. What do you propose next? I thought all you Americans were men of business.'

'Mr. Clavering refrains from prosecuting you at present, in deference to my wishes. Probably I shall set his hands free very soon—in any case, your day of reckoning will come.'

'I sincerely hope so. It has been a long time on the way.'

'You may depend upon it, you are not far off it now. You have heard my last word. Take your annuity and be off to Australia—it is the best thing you can do.'

'Bah! The colonial business is played out, except in old-fashioned novels. Now I will talk rationally to you. Make a settlement upon me of five hundred a year, and I will go away. Not abroad, mind—England is quite good enough for

me. Those who don't like it can leave it, and there will be more room for those who *do* like it. But none of you shall see or hear of me again. I have named a small sum. What do you say, Geoffrey? Come, you have not said much yet.'

'I will pay you what Mr. Snapper has proposed,' replied Clavering, 'but I should much prefer to send you to jail at once.'

'Your words are harsh, but I will give you a week to think over my proposition. If at the end of that time you are still of the same mind, you shall call in the police if you like, and welcome. But you will think better of it long before that! Shall it be a truce for a week, then? Something may turn up before it is over—who knows?'

There was a sinister look in his eyes which did not escape Snapper's notice. He whispered a few words to Clavering,

and then looked up at Finch, and pointed to the door.

'You can go,' said he, contemptuously, —'for the present.'

'Very good,' replied Finch, taking up his hat. 'Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Snapper. Good-morning, Geoffrey. You will not shake hands? No matter—we still part as friends. In one week we meet again—unless something new happens before.'

He stuck his hat on the side of his head, pulled out a pair of old gloves from his pocket, opened the door, and disappeared.

'The scoundrel has some other move in view,' said Rufus Snapper, with an involuntary sigh. 'We have not heard the last of him.'

'Let him do what he likes,' replied Clavering, shaking himself as if a great burden had fallen from him. 'He cannot

do much harm, and when he takes his next move, as you say, I will take mine, and put him where he ought to have been long ago.'

But Mr. Snapper seemed dejected, and evidently was very far from sharing the confidence of his companion.

'Suppose we go out, at any rate,' he said; 'that villain has poisoned the air here. Come and let me show you a picture I bought the other day. You will not go home till to-morrow.'

Together they went forth, and not another word did either utter concerning Thomas Finch.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. MARTIN ASSERTS HER RIGHTS.

The next day, before Clavering had returned, a strange woman presented herself at Porthcawl Castle, and her appearance occasioned no little perplexity to the servant who happened to admit her. The man was a native of the locality ; he knew everybody round about for miles, and was familiar with the faces of most of the visitors at Porthcawl. But he had never seen this face before, and he could not tell what to make of its possessor. She simply asked for Mr. Clavering.

'Mr. Clavering died more than a month ago,' replied the man, thinking that the stranger was referring to the old squire.

'You mistake me,' said she, with a half smile; 'I mean Mr. Geoffrey Clavering. I wish to see him on very important business.'

'Will you tell me your name?'

'My name is of no consequence at all. When he sees me he will know me, and understand what I have come for.'

'Then you have an appointment with him?' said the servant, beginning to be more deferential in his tone.

'Yes, a sort of appointment.'

She partly raised her veil, and the man could see that she was not a woman of his own class although her dress was plain—much plainer than most of the female servants at Porthcawl would have condescended to wear when they went out for

a holiday. She was not pretty, and not very young, but there was a certain air about her which caused the footman to decide that it would be advisable to treat her with civility. Therefore he admitted her into the hall, and suddenly recollected that his master was away from home. He now imparted that piece of news to the stranger.

'Then I will wait till he returns,' said the woman, coolly, as she walked forward towards a room, the door of which stood open.

There, at that precise moment, Edith Pendleton happened to be writing a letter, and the footman knew it. He therefore led the visitor to a morning-room, wondering within himself who she was, where she came from, and what she wanted with his master. Once or twice he was on the point of questioning her further, but she

stopped him by a glance. He went away, somewhat cowed, in search of the old and faithful servant of the family, Pritchard, to whom he told his tale. And a very curious tale did it seem to Pritchard, for he was aware that unknown ladies were rare at Porthcawl. Moreover, he was a little uneasy on his master's account, owing to the undefined fears which the recent tragedy in the house had occasioned. But his stolid visage betrayed no emotion when he entered the room where the visitor was waiting.

He remained there a few minutes, and, when he came out, he looked still more puzzled than when he went in. He held his hand upon the lock of the door as if he were hesitating what to do. That, in fact, was the case; he was uncertain whether to go back to the visitor and speak to her again or to carry out some

instruction she had given him. At last he decided upon the latter course.

He made his appearance before Edith Pendleton with evident reluctance. She looked up at him with surprise and then with a sort of dread; for, in spite of all his efforts to prevent it, there was a look upon his face which seemed to say that another blow had fallen, or was about to fall, upon the Clavering family. Pritchard stood silent for a moment or two, while Edith waited anxiously for him to speak.

'Has anything happened to your master?' her face grew a shade or two paler as she spoke.

'No, miss, it is not that—Mr. Clavering is well, no doubt. The colonel drove over to meet him half-an-hour ago; they will be here before long.'

'Then what is the matter, Pritchard?'

'Perhaps I ought not to speak to you

about it, miss, but I do not quite know what it is best for me to do.'

'Well, then, let me decide for you; between us we shall be able to settle the matter, unless it is something very serious.'

Her anxiety having vanished as suddenly as it came, she sat down to the desk again and made a sign to Pritchard to go on.

'The fact is, miss,' he said, 'that in the small morning-room there is a woman who insists upon waiting for the squire. I have never seen her before, but she seems to know *him* well, and says he will expect to find her here when he comes back. I tried to make her tell me what she wanted, but she is very close and firm, and merely says, "I will wait till Mr. Clavering returns—then he will know my business at once." That is all I can get from her.'

'What sort of a woman is she?'

'Well, miss, it is hard to say; she speaks

like a lady, and yet she does not seem to be one. And then she is hot and flustered like, and I think she has been drinking a little—she has such a strange way with her. If she has ever seen the master, it must have been in London; I am sure she has never been *here* before.'

'Is she young?'

'She is not, miss, and yet she is. She looks like one who is getting old before her time; I noticed that her hair was greyish, and her face rather worn. But I am sure she is young in spite of that; not over thirty, I should say. And she has been good-looking, but has gone off. She seems quite at home here, miss; to see her in that room, you would think she was the mistress of the place.'

An unaccountable depression stole over Edith. In a household where one calamity has occurred, another seems to be always

impending. Here and there, a word or two of Pritchard's had filled her mind with a vague and dark misgiving.

'Did the woman say nothing more to you than you have told me?' she asked.

'Only that she intends to remain until she has seen Mr. Clavering.'

'It is very strange. Is she——'

Edith hesitated a moment, but Pritchard understood her.

'She is not crazy,' replied the old man; 'she seems to know what she is about very well, and she says she has a *right* to see the squire.'

'A right!' repeated Edith, drawing herself up proudly. 'She must be an impostor, Pritchard, and perhaps it is wrong to let her stay in the house a moment. What is to be done? She ought not to be allowed to annoy your master. Can you think of nothing to prevent it?'

'I am afraid not, miss;' and then he added, though with evident unwillingness, 'but perhaps *you* might.'

'I? How?'

'Well, miss, I did not like to tell you, for it may only be her impudence, but when I mentioned that the squire was in London, just to get rid of her, she said, "He *was* in London last night; I am aware of that. But he will be home to-day, and I must wait for him. Perhaps you had better tell Miss Pendleton that I am here—she may be willing to see me." Those were her words, miss, but I did not like to repeat them to you.'

Edith got up immediately, perfectly composed. Her fears and doubts seemed to slip at once from her mind.

'By all means I will see her,' she said, with a cheerful look, intended to encourage the old servant, who was still anxious and

worried. 'It may be some trifling matter that I can settle quite as well as your master. We must save him this needless annoyance, if we can. Come, take me to her.'

Pritchard bowed, and preceded her to the morning-room. But, before he had gone many steps, his sense of duty once more led him to hesitate, and he felt sorry that he had repeated the stranger's message. He paused, and stammered out a few words.

'What is it, Pritchard?'

'I beg pardon, miss, but are you sure that you wish to see this woman?'

'I do not—but she wishes to see me. She must have come a long way; I need not tell you that we live far from everywhere, Pritchard. There is no reason why I should refuse to see her.'

'But she might——'

'Bite? Nonsense, Pritchard. I will ring, if I want you; at present, go and open the door.'

The old man obeyed; but he lingered in the room, for he regarded the stranger with suspicion and distrust. The woman rose from her chair as the colonel's daughter entered, inclined her head slightly, and then looked at Pritchard.

'It will be well,' she said, 'to send this man away. I have come on business of importance, and Mr. Clavering might not wish to have his servants know all about it.'

Pritchard stood on the threshold irresolute, but a slight sign from Edith Pendleton decided him. He withdrew quickly from the room.

'Now you will perhaps be kind enough to tell me why you have desired to see me.'

As she spoke, Edith Pendleton noticed that the stranger was regarding her attentively. The truth was that the woman had heard a good deal of the colonel's daughter, and her curiosity was great to see for herself whether the reports of her beauty had been exaggerated. One glance seemed to satisfy her on that point, for she cast down her eyes and sighed. Then an angry look overshadowed her face, and the lines about her mouth hardened, and it seemed to Edith Pendleton that her features had suddenly become coarse.

'I will not leave the house now until it is all over, come what may,' said the stranger to herself; and then she asked, in a timid way which did not accord with her bold look, 'Are you the daughter of Colonel Pendleton?'

'Yes,' said Edith, too much puzzled by the woman to be offended.

'Then you may have heard your father speak of me. My name—the name that he would remember me by—is Mrs. Martin.'

'I cannot say that I have heard it before,' said Edith, after a little reflection. 'Where has my father seen you? I do not remember——'

'Oh, no; it was not in any place where you are ever likely to be that Colonel Pendleton saw me. It was at my father's lodgings in the city—a place called Garlick Hill. You have not heard of that either?'

'Yes, I have heard of that,' replied Edith, and her face became very grave, for she recalled in an instant the evening upon which her father had gone to the mysterious meeting with his unknown correspondent, the questions which Geoffrey Clavering had asked on his return, his

own apparent ignorance of the man and of everything connected with him. And now here was the daughter of that man imperiously demanding an interview with Geoffrey, and declaring that she had come on important business. The young girl's courage did not fail her, but the presentiment of coming evil hung heavily over her mind.

'My father saw Colonel Pendleton for the first time that night,' said the woman, 'but I had heard of *you* before from—from many persons.'

'Indeed, and who were they?'

'Well, Mr. Rafferty was one of them. He frequently spoke of you.'

'He is an utter stranger to me,' replied Edith, coldly.

'He spoke as if he had seen you often and often.'

'Then it must have been at a distance.'

Edith began to be a little amused, for she recalled the rumours afloat in the household concerning the clandestine visits of Rafferty to his mother, for whom he had often been seen lurking among the trees in the park. And there was the memorable scene with the old squire, which all the servants had heard of. But this did not explain why Rafferty had ventured to use *her* name so freely.

'You cannot tell me where he is now, I suppose,' said Mrs. Martin, in a tone which Edith could not understand.

'Indeed I cannot. If that is the object of your visit, I can prevent any further loss of your time. No one here knows anything about Mr. Rafferty. I am quite sure Mr. Clavering does not. If that is all you came to see him about, let me answer the question at once.'

'That is not all,' said the woman, with

a sneer which brought the colour to Edith's face; 'in fact, it is not any part of my real business here. Besides, Mr. Clavering may know Sam Rafferty without your being aware of it. He may know many people you have never heard of.'

'What do you mean?'

There was something so peculiar in the woman's tone that Edith could not suppress the exclamation which rose to her lips.

'I will tell you presently—when he comes back. They say he will be here by three o'clock, and it must be nearly that now. I daresay he will explain everything to you or to me; it will be all the same.' The stranger pretended to think deeply for a few minutes, but in reality she was watching Edith. 'She is very handsome,' she mused; 'I have seen English girls as handsome, but not in that particular style. So *this* is what

has taken his fancy. Decidedly it was a change, and if he could not see her very often, I suppose he liked her all the better for it. When once he was struck, he would think nothing of the journey from London, even though the house was shut to him, and they could only meet in secret. Well, she is worth it; I would take as much trouble about her, too, if I were a man.'

She gazed upon Edith's pure face and classic figure with evident admiration, and for an instant the look of resentment vanished from her brow.

'So you think that the squire does not know Sam Rafferty?' she said, with a transient smile.

'It is not at all likely.'

'Well, I know them both perfectly well —I scarcely can tell which I have known the longest.'

'Mr. Rafferty, probably. I now remem-

ber that my father said a few words which led us to think that Mr. Rafferty was married. You, then, are his wife?'

The visitor looked at her for a moment as if surprised. Then she said,

'You are more accustomed to guessing mysteries than I fancied. Did Colonel Pendleton tell the squire that I was Rafferty's wife?'

'I daresay he did.'

'And I wonder what your friend, Mr. Clavering, said to that? Was he astonished, or did he know of it before?'

'I imagine that he felt no interest in it, one way or the other.'

'You think not? Yet I should like to have been looking on when Colonel Pendleton gave him the news. I wonder where the colonel got it from. Not from me. He was with me nearly an hour, but I told him no secrets. I merely wanted to

save him from being duped, and I doubt very much whether I succeeded, after all. Men were always too clever for me, and my father is a very clever man. Everybody admits that.' It was difficult to say whether she spoke in jest or in earnest. Her manner was serious, but there was something in her tone which grated harshly upon Edith's ears.

'Yes, my father is a clever man,' she continued, 'and he arranged my marriage for me—for you are quite right, I *am* married. It did not happen very recently, you understand—I do not look much like a bride.'

She turned her face again towards Edith, and the young girl was struck with the hard, even sinister, expression of the eyes, and with the heavy lines about the mouth. Evidently this was a woman

whose experiences of the world had been of no gentle kind.

'I am not a bride,' she went on, laughing to herself. 'Everything relating to my marriage is now a sort of dream—it happened so long ago! And yet my husband is still young, for he was younger than I was at the time, and a good deal more unsuspecting! I had learnt to doubt the world very much, but he had no doubts—a good, simple, easy-going young fellow enough, he was at that time.'

'He must have changed very much since,' thought Edith, but she said nothing. She began to feel a certain kind of interest in the woman's remarks, and almost forgot her apprehensions of evil.

'He was very poor then—did you know that?'

'I never heard that Mr. Rafferty was

ever rich,' replied Edith, trying in vain to keep back a smile.

'Perhaps not,' said the visitor, after a rapid glance at the colonel's daughter. 'My husband was never rich. He had an allowance, but it was not much, and it soon went. Of course we were not happy; you cannot be happy long together without money. Perhaps even with it we might not have fared much better, for I knew then, as I know now, that he did not really love me. It was only a passing fancy, and it was soon over!'

'Poor girl!'

The colonel's daughter spoke with genuine feeling, but it seemed to provoke the visitor.

'Say rather,' she said, bitterly, 'poor young man, for he was the more to be pitied. It was harder for him than for me; my father alone would have taken

care to make it that. You do not know what a priceless privilege it is to have a man like my father to look after you.'

Again she laughed, but never was laughter so devoid of mirth.

'My good father thought his chance had come at last—to say nothing of mine, and for some time, if he did not actually get as much money as he wanted, he got all that he could, and it kept him going. We were no longer in want. That, perhaps, was as pleasant a part of my life as any, for my father's eternal complaints of poverty were not ringing in my ears, and I lived in comfort. Of course it could not last; I knew from the first that it would not. My father insisted upon living with us—only for a time, he said—and from first to last he was rarely sober. Some people have prejudices against men who cannot keep sober; my husband had. His absences

from home became more and more frequent, and lasted longer each time. I had expected this, but none the less it stung me. At last he never came at all; and to-day I see the reason why. It is not so very strange, after all. I suspected the truth all along; since I came here, I have found out everything. Even he would have nothing more to tell me.'

'What do you mean?' asked Edith, looking at the stranger in blank amazement.

'Do you mean to say that you cannot guess?'

'I do not in the least understand you. Are you well—shall I send a servant to you?'

Edith walked towards the door, for now she felt assured that her first suspicions were correct, and that the stranger was not in her right senses. Her wandering

looks, her incoherent words, all proved it.

'Stop a moment,' said the woman, also rising to her feet. 'You must not go away like this! You have learned nothing yet, and I meant to tell you all. Your ideas about me and Rafferty put me out for a few minutes—they were so amusing. How innocent you have been of everything!'

Her look was dark, almost fierce. The longer she was in Edith's presence, the more surely some impatience or irritation gained the mastery over her.

'And so among them all they have told you absolutely nothing! Well, you must not go on without telling *me* one thing, at any rate—is he in love with you? Are you to be married? That is what I have heard, and I came here chiefly to find out whether it was true or not. You need not

look so indignant. Let us exchange confidences—answer my question, and I will tell you why I ask it. Let us put what we know together; I shall be giving more than you in any case.'

Astonishment had caused Edith to stand still for a moment, but now, with a proud mien, she again moved towards the door. The visitor sprang forward, and placed herself in the young girl's way.

'Wait a little,' she said, with her hand outstretched. 'I heard a carriage drive up; it is doubtless the man we are both expecting. You will not tell me what I seek to know? You are a poor silly child. As if it needed any conjuror to read your secret! I can see it in your face whenever I mention his name. Now listen to me, and I will give you some advice which may save you a world of future trouble.'

'Let me pass!' said the colonel's daugh-

ter, her eyes flashing; but the stranger was stubborn and determined, and Edith was compelled to stand still.

'What I want to say is for your own good,' said the woman, with a sneer. 'I may never have another chance of warning you. Whatever Geoffrey Clavering may be to you, and whatever he has said, beware of him! Leave this place as soon as you can. There is a shadow over the house, and, although it is not in your power to remove it, it may fall upon your life and blight it if you persist in lingering here. Are you heeding me? You stare at me, as if I were mad!'

'And so you are, poor soul!' murmured Edith, speaking only to herself; but the woman heard her.

'Do not delude yourself! I have sometimes been very near to madness, and shall be again if my life lasts; but I know what

I am saying to you, and some day you will find out that it is the truth. Once more, I bid you fly from this house, for I tell you that a blight is over it, and it will fall upon you! Your father has been blind, or he would have taken you away long ago—anywhere, back to America, somewhere abroad, away from them all. Colonel Pendleton is a believer in honour, but he ought not to have left you here. He did not know so much about Geoffrey Clavering as I do. When you hear his story and mine, I daresay you will be ready enough to pity *him*, though no one has ever had any pity for me.'

'I pity you now, from my heart,' said Edith, earnestly; but her sympathy, so far from softening the woman, only seemed to rouse her anger.

'Who asked for your pity?' she replied, savagely. 'Are you quite sure that you

do not stand in need of *mine* much more than I do of yours? I have come to this house a stranger, as you see, and yet, if I choose to remain, there is no one to prevent me; while *you*—well, you are here upon sufferance only. If I ordered you to go——'

There was a noise outside, and the woman paused a moment. She listened intently, and evidently recognised the approaching footsteps, for she checked her passion, and became silent. Her lips grew colourless as the door opened, and the person whom she most hated and feared entered the room—the master of the house.

Clavering stood for a moment looking from one to the other, mute with surprise. Evidently he recognised the stranger, for a heavy frown gathered on his brow.

'*You* here,' he said—and there was a

kind of horror in his tone which made Edith's blood run cold.

The woman merely nodded.

'Who is this dreadful woman? You know her, Geoffrey?'

'I will tell you presently, Edith—leave her to me; I will take you to your father. As for you' (here he turned to the stranger) —'wait till I return!'

'Never mind me,' said she, coolly— 'you had better look to the young lady; can you not see that she is nearly fainting? The sooner she gets back to her father the better.'

But Edith conquered a passing weakness, and stood up firm and erect before them both.

'Who is this woman, I ask?' she repeated.

The stranger laughed, and went leisurely to a chair. Edith kept her eyes fixed

upon Geoffrey Clavering, thunderstruck at his silence.

'Ay, make him tell you,' said the woman, in her sardonic tones; 'he will answer you presently, no doubt. At present he is taken by surprise at my appearance, and then he is so very glad to see me. Observe him—he is quite overcome! It is long since we have met, you must know, and the unlooked-for pleasure is almost too much for him. He is overjoyed, poor fellow, that is all!'

'Geoffrey, speak! Why is this woman here? What does she mean by the terrible things she has said? For pity's sake, speak! Your silence is worse than all her words.'

'Why do you not tell her?' asked the woman; and then, after a moment's hesitation, she turned to Edith, who seemed to shrink from her very look, and uttered a few words, every one of which fell like a

heavy blow upon both her hearers: 'If he will not speak, I must. I am here by right, Miss Pendleton. *I am his wife*—that is all!'

'It is false,' exclaimed the young girl, and once more the room seemed to swim before her eyes.

'It is true! If you doubt it, ask *him!*'

Edith cast but one glance at Geoffrey Clavering and needed no answer other than she read in his face.

'It is true, God help me!' he murmured, and stretched out his arm to support the shrinking figure; but with a deep, convulsive sob, Edith passed from the room.

Husband and wife looked at each other for a moment in silence. Now that all was over, the woman seemed scared at her work.

'Are you satisfied?' said Clavering. 'If so, you may leave the house which for a

second time you have darkened. Leave me to the misery you have so wantonly brought upon my head.'

The wife turned and faced him, once more reckless and defiant.

'I am quite satisfied. Now we can go on as usual—you on your road, I on mine. As for bringing misery on your head, that is your business—you should have thought of that before you married me. That chit of a girl will soon get over the shock—it is nothing to what I have gone through in my time.'

'Leave the house,' cried Clavering, hoarsely.

'Suppose I refuse?'

The woman still stood looking at him with an exasperating smile.

'I advise you not to try me too far! I am scarcely master of myself when I think of what a curse you have been to me, you

and your father! If there was deception, you know well on whose side it was. Once more I tell you to leave my house.'

The woman looked at him, and something in his face shocked or frightened her. She lowered her head and said, in an altered voice:

'Yes, I will go. Perhaps I should never have come but for my father. He has often urged me to do this, and, after all, it does not seem likely to help either of us very much.'

'So this is another stroke of his work, is it?'

'Partly, but recollect one thing, Geoffrey—I may not have your love, but no one else shall claim it while I am alive. We must both of us reap what we have sown, you know. Perhaps you were not so much to blame, but it is too late to alter anything now. You will forgive me for

coming here—I am sorry for that now. You will not shake hands? At least, say good-bye!'

But no response came from the husband. He sank into a chair like a man stupefied, and seemed almost unconscious of everything until he became aware that the woman had gone and that Colonel Pendleton stood by his side.

CHAPTER X.

A PARTING.

Colonel Pendleton had exchanged but a few words with his daughter before he entered the room, and his first thought was that the son of his old friend had fallen into the power of a designing woman, and that her story of the marriage was an invention. His sole anxiety now was to see whether he could be of service to Geoffrey Clavering in extricating him from his difficulties. He was still without the least suspicion that any feeling had sprung up between his daughter and the

young squire stronger than that of friendship, and there was no shade of resentment in his mind as he walked up to Geoffrey and placed his hand kindly upon his shoulder—nothing but sympathy and an earnest desire to help him.

'You know what has happened,' said the young man, with his friend's hand tightly clasped in his own.

'I know what Edith has told me. It was very little she said, but it was enough to show me that my place was by your side. I do not wish you to tell me anything if it would cause you pain to do so, but you know well that you may safely confide in me. What is there that I can do?'

'Nothing, my dear colonel; it is too late for anyone to help me now. I fell into a trap, and I suppose I deserve my punishment.'

'Do not look entirely on the dark side,' said the colonel, in an encouraging tone. 'I have not much experience of such matters, it is true, but I know enough of the world to be aware that disasters of this kind are not wholly irreparable. Something may be done.'

'There is nothing to be done, except for me to go away abroad somewhere, and never to come back while that woman is alive.'

'Are you, then, so entirely in her hands?'

'Have you not heard? She is my wife.'

'Great heavens!'

The colonel paced sorrowfully up and down the room; the whole story still seemed utterly incredible. Here was a young fellow whom he had known from boyhood, and whose life, as he thought, had lain open to him as the pages of a book. And

yet this terrible secret had been entirely concealed from him.

'Why did you not confide in me,' he said, though not reproachfully. Great pity for the boy—as he still regarded him—who had been made the victim of adventurers was his predominant emotion even now. 'You could not have gone to your father, I suppose—unfortunately there were never any confidences between you; but you might have trusted in me. Have you never told anyone?'

'I told Rufus Snapper, only a little while ago. I was obliged to tell him; my wife's father was forging my name in all directions, and I could not endure that any longer. I went to Snapper to see what could be done.'

'He never mentioned it to me,' said the colonel, thoughtfully.

'He faithfully promised me that he would not.'

'But when did this miserable affair take place?'

'Four years ago.'

'Why, you were but eighteen then!'

'Just so; and I knew as little of mankind as a boy of twelve. Oh, they found me an easy prey! My worthy father-in-law had not met with so desirable a pigeon to pluck for years. He made the best of his opportunities, and has been following them up ever since. Between them, they have made shipwreck of my life.'

'That is more than any man has a right to say,' replied the colonel, with a sad smile. 'The storms beat us about a good deal, and it seems to be all over with us sometimes—but we manage to float. Few men arrive at middle age without having

to rig up a jury mast, and go on as well as they can—not as they meant to do. The main thing is, never to give up. You must clear away the wreckage, and set about repairs.'

'No repairs are possible with me.'

'I do not know about that. One thing is always possible—to do one's duty. Now this woman—this lady'—the colonel hastily corrected himself—'she is your wife; perhaps you have not acted wisely in making her so——'

'I acted like a madman,' broke in Clavering, impetuously.

'I dare say,' said the colonel, feeling his heart sink within him, in spite of the cheerful demeanour he endeavoured to preserve. 'There is a remedy for almost every mistake in life but a rash and foolish marriage. I do not, however, know the

circumstances of yours—they may not be so bad as at first you caused me to fear.'

'They are ten times worse.'

'Even in that case, you must do what is right.'

'Do you mean that I must live with her—instal her as mistress in this house?'

The young man stared aghast at his friend.

'How can I decide, when I am ignorant of everything concerning her, except that you made her your wife? If she is not an unworthy woman—if she is simply beneath you in station—then I say that you ought not to hesitate about your course. She should come to your home; it is her right to be here, it is your duty to receive her.'

'You would not advise this if you knew *her*, or her father either! I wish to Heaven you knew how they have treated me from

the first. The father, I verily believe, is one of the greatest scoundrels upon earth.'

'Leave the father out; you are under no obligation to live with him. Your wife—if she has been a true wife, as I assume—must not be allowed to suffer for her father's offences. Where is she living now?'

'In London, I believe. But she seldom condescends to let me know of her movements. She left me of her own free will, and never expressed a desire to return. Do not think that the casting off has been on my side! Even to-day when she was here she evinced no desire to remain. All that I am good for is to supply them with money.'

'How in the world did it all come about?'

The colonel's perplexity was still too

great and too sincere to be altogether disguised.

'It all happened in five minutes, as it were. When I left home for the last time, you are aware that I was to go to Oxford, but I had not learned much here, and the private school I was sent to did not improve matters. At that time there was a man living in this part of Wales, who was famous as a "coach." He was supposed to be without an equal in pulling his pupils through almost any sort of examination. He made a great deal of money, and might have made more, but for his love of drink. That eventually got the upper hand of him altogether, but when I first knew him he could keep sober enough to attend to his duties. He was then living at Aberystwith; my father heard of him from an old friend, and I was sent to him.'

'What was his name?'

'Finch—Thomas Finch——' the colonel started,—'yes, you have seen him. You remember the night you told us of your mysterious meeting with a stranger in London? I suspected then that you had discovered all, but Finch was not likely to give his information for nothing. He sent for you so that he might bring additional pressure to bear upon me.'

'Thomas Finch!' Colonel Pendleton repeated the words like one emerging from a dream.

He recollected how greatly surprised he had been to find that the disreputable looking man in those dreary lodgings had been in correspondence with Geoffrey Clavering, and how much more surprised he was to see him that same night in the Albany, apparently on his way to Geoffrey's chambers.

'And so this man was your old tutor—

I ought to have remembered the name. The truth is, I believed him to be a rank impostor, who had somehow induced you to write a letter to him. The pretended object of his sending for me was to give a confused sort of warning about some danger which menaced you. I could not understand what he was driving at, and soon dismissed him altogether from my mind.'

'I wish I could have dismissed him from mine,' said the younger man, grimly.

'I recollect,' continued the colonel, 'that he spoke particularly of Rafferty, Mrs. Clavering's son. Now our friend, Rufus Snapper, has very grave suspicions about this Rafferty; he has long been keeping a watch upon him; but especially since your poor father's death. This Rafferty was seen lurking about Porthcawl a great deal before the murder, sometimes with another

man, about whom *I* happen to know something. Depend upon it, they did not come here as idle travellers to see the place! In fact, Snapper suspects nothing less than this—that Rafferty is actually the man who committed the crime. I am sure he does so, although he has never said as much. Bless me!' and the colonel stood stock still as the thought darted through his mind. 'In that case may not Rafferty have told Finch, and would not that account for Finch's letter to me, warning us of danger? Nothing could be more natural, Rafferty being Finch's son-in-law.'

'His son-in-law?' exclaimed Clavering, thoroughly puzzled.

'That was what they led me to believe. They did not say as much, but they went next door to it.' The colonel stopped again, and looked closely at Clavering.

All at once a mist seemed to clear away from his eyes.

'The woman who was with Finch that night! Can it be that she is *your* wife? I remember now that she asked many questions about you.'

'Very likely—I heard that she was in London somewhere; they did not trouble to tell me where. They supposed that I should take the alarm when I found out they had sent for you, and pay any demands they chose to make.'

'Was she—your wife—capable of taking part in such a conspiracy as that?'

'Her father always says the money is for her; it is in her name that he comes. What more can I know about it?'

'I should doubt very much if she is a woman of that kind,' said the colonel, shaking his head, 'but of the father I might believe anything. She specially

warned me against him—that does not look much like the conduct of an adventuress. Depend upon it, you have been deceived in some way, and she is not guilty of plundering you. Has she never endeavoured to see you?'

'Never until to-day. Do not be under any delusion—there was never any love for me in her heart! About that, at least, she did not leave me long in doubt.'

'How in the world did you——' the colonel paused, as if afraid of giving pain.

'Did I come to marry her, you would say? I think I could scarcely have told you at the time—and you may well be amazed now that you have seen father and daughter. But, to do them justice, they were not always what they are to-day. Thomas Finch was a man without principle, but he was not a ruffian, and he used occasionally to be sober, at least in the

day-time. It was said that at night he was generally drunk; but that seemed to be nobody's affair but his own. It was not till after my marriage that he went completely to the bad: He took it for granted that his fortune was made, and I suppose it was, for he has never done a day's work since.'

'But why have you not thrown him off?'

'You do not know the kind of man he is! Refuse to give him money, and he will take it—he has even stolen cheques from my room, and forged my name to them. I do not think *she* knows of that; but she was a party to the first and worst deception practised upon me, and what are all the others in comparison? She must have been aware of her father's motive in bringing about the marriage, and she assisted him. I was not more the dupe of one than of the other.'

'I can understand it better now,' said the colonel, sighing. 'I always feared that harm would come of that estrangement between you and your father. You had been brought up in great seclusion from the world, and there was no one to give you a word of caution when you were sent adrift into it. Do not think that I altogether blame you, my poor boy!'

Clavering was deeply moved at the tone in which the last few words were uttered, and a minute or two passed before either of them spoke again. The colonel was thinking much on what he had heard, and one reflection crossed his mind again and again—'It might have been worse! Thank heaven, Edith will pass scathless through all this. If *her* affections had been concerned——' and then he was led into another reverie, and at the end of it he determined that his daughter must be

taken away, and at once. Since the old squire's funeral, they had remained in the house, as the closest friends alike of the murdered man and his son; but now they must bid farewell for ever to Porthcawl Castle. He looked up, and Geoffrey's gloomy face rekindled his sympathies.

'Tell me everything,' he said. 'I may yet see something to be done.'

'There is not much more to tell,' responded Clavering, with a sort of groan. 'It was all very carefully planned. I was alone in the house with Finch and his daughter, for at that time he had no other pupils. Often we three went on a little excursion together—he, wrapped up in some book, would stroll off by himself; I thought I was in love, and Finch took care to make me feel that his daughter was. Why go over a story so hateful to me? In

the course of a few weeks we were married, and very shortly afterwards I found out that my wife had only condescended to smile on me when some one to whom she had previously been engaged had gone abroad. I believe she has taken his name since—the name of Martin.'

'That seems rather strange.'

'It all seems strange enough to me now. At any rate, there was a lover before I appeared on the scene; but I was supposed to be rich—the very person for whom Finch had been on the look-out for years. No wonder that he exercised all his powers—and they were considerable, I assure you; do not judge by what *you* have seen of them!—to make a capture of me. I was no match for him in cunning, and it ended as I have told you.

'For that was the end, or very near it.

When I mentioned the lover, Finch denied it; my wife only burst out laughing. She very soon gave me to understand that I was not likely to replace in her affections the gentleman who had run away. At last my slender funds were exhausted. Out of my allowance, Finch could always count upon getting enough to enable him to live in idleness, but his daughter seemed to be ashamed of the game he was playing. One day she went away, and sent a note to explain that, as we were merely an encumbrance to each other, it would be better to part. Her father went with her, but he brought me back her note. He complained bitterly of the injustice I had done to his daughter—of course I had kept the marriage a secret—and demanded reparation in the shape of so much a month to be paid to *him*. I saw that I was in the hands of a swindler, but I agreed to pay

the money as long as I could—to him or to her, what did it matter? Anything was better than letting my father know what had occurred. No doubt I was a fool—but remember again that I was little more than eighteen. Since then, whatever resources I have had have been taxed heavily by Finch—rest assured of that!'

'But what becomes of it? They live in a wretched place.'

'So I gathered from you the night you saw them, and that led me to make inquiries. I begin to suspect that she—my wife—has never had any of this money of mine. If I am right, Finch shall suffer for all his villainies yet, never fear! I will not spare him now.'

'Somehow or other, you must get out of his toils,' said the colonel, feeling himself quite lost in the face of such a problem as this. 'You must do it for that poor

woman's sake as well as for your own. Your wife must have a home provided for her, as a matter of course.'

'That I have offered to find for her repeatedly, and she has always refused.'

'I suppose her father instigates her?'

'No doubt; while he has her under his influence, the mystery as to what he does with my money—if there is one—can at least be hidden from her. But I will drag it all to light now—he has played his game out, so far as I am concerned. My turn is coming. If I could only have saved you—and Edith—from the knowledge of all this!'

He uttered the name of the colonel's daughter with evident reluctance, and his features contracted as if with a spasm of pain. The colonel observed it all with evident sympathy.

'Do not think of us,' he said, gently;

'our regrets are all for you, and we would give the world to help you, as you know. You must reconcile yourself to the lot you have prepared for yourself—it is the inexorable law for us all! I know how little comfort there is in telling you so, and yet what can I say?'

'Nothing, nothing!'

Clavering again wrung his old friend's hand, the tears standing in his eyes.

'As we make our bed, so must we lie upon it,' said the colonel, in his sad voice. 'It is a homely saying, but there is none so true. And of course we pay no heed to it when we are young, and scarcely ever see the consequences of our acts until it is too late. Then we have to go softly the rest of our days, as King David says. The only thing is, as I told you before, we must not give in. We cannot fight so good a fight as we might have

done, but we can fight on—even on our stumps! Fight on while breath is in us—it is astonishing how much will come out right, after all. You, my dear Geoffrey, must get back to the straight road——'

'It is a little too late for that,' said the young man, with bitterness.

'No, it is never too late. If a man has been out of that road ever so much, it is still good for him to get back to it. He will be better off there than anywhere else. Courage, my boy! We must never part with our determination that, come what may, we will not be beaten. You spoke of shipwreck, just now. Well, suppose even it has come to that, we need not go down shrieking, howling, and panic-stricken, with all the manhood gone out of us! No, no—let us turn a brave face upwards and sink, if it must be so, with an undaunted heart. But you will not sink. There are many duties

in life before you—the more a man sticks to his duty, the happier he is, no matter where his lot may be cast, or what may be his pleasures or his sorrows. I, my dear Geoffrey, have been ground between the upper and the nether mill-stones; I speak from experience!'

'I will do my best,' said the young man, with a faint smile.

'That is it—it is all we can do in most of the trying situations of life. I am powerless to help you now, but when you need me, for any purpose whatever, a word will bring me to you. And now we must part. You know we were going very soon in any case, but for many reasons it must be now. Edith will be distressed at these grievous events for your sake—I think you had better not see her again to-day. By-and-by, perhaps.'

'May I not tell her——'

'I would tell her nothing more at present. It has been a great shock to her. She could not be more devoted to your welfare had you been her own brother, and it was very unfortunate that she was the first to hear of all this.'

The colonel had done his utmost to inspire Clavering with hope and confidence, but his own heart was heavy within him.

An hour or two afterwards the carriage drove up to the door, and the master of the house stood at the foot of the staircase as his guests were descending. He scarcely seemed to see the colonel; his whole attention was fixed on Edith, whose face was very pale. He advanced towards her, and held her hand for a brief moment.

'Good-bye, Edith,' he said, in a low voice; 'God bless you for all that you have been to me, and all you ever will be!'

The young girl looked at him sadly, and then a gentle light came into her eyes, and it was in the old sweet, winning tone, although the smile had vanished from her face, that she uttered her last farewell.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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